BOY GOTHIC AND OTHER STORIES

BY

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Contents

Boy Gothic

The hendera had beaten Sam's father. The five-pointed ivy strangled their old lawnmower, tendrils knotted about the driveshaft. The man retreated into the house and everyone saw. Uninhibited, the ivy smothered the sideyard, even the fading white-brick pathway turning yellow with age, the one that led to and past the goldfish hole, the pond. Sam's father yanked the blinds open then closed, picked at his sweated shirt, told Sam, "Go outside, it's good for you, make friends."

The yard pushed west towards the drainage ditch, a sewer, a creek, then—three miles over the ridge—the big river, and you could slog it, provided you had six hours and an eye for water moccasins. Sam obeyed his father.

He hit the humid air, a thin smudge against the body of the brown house. Ivy ran out across the sideyard forty feet and tapered at the wire fence, boundary for *what's ours*. The neighbors hacked it, burned it, were at it constantly, even today. The husband, red-faced and radiating exertion, stooped with his sheers and clipped. Sam let the screendoor rattle behind him. Speckled shadow fell across him from the overhead oak.

"Hey-o, Sammy," the neighbor called. "What's your pa doing? This's a two-man job, you know?" Sam's father's mower was heaved on its side against the wire fence, bowing it. Sam turned and squinted at the den window. The blinds were drawn. He turned back.

"I'll help," Sam said.

The neighbor reached over the divide, pushed at his father's mower, easing it off the fence. It tipped and splashed among the Hendera.

"No, no, go tell your pa I'd like to talk with him." The neighbor was thick, wore hard bluejeans, a ridged cap. Sam popped the screendoor and tried the knob, but it was suddenly locked against him. Sam was still and listened. Nothing. The neighbor stopped gathering ivy, his back straightening. "That's okay, son. Go play. I'll teach you to help someday."

"Yessir," Sam said. Sam thought the smoke spiraling from the piled hendera could only be good, since it smelled like cooking and meant you could run in the man's yard without tangling your feet.

It was a hot day, the breeze mercifully strong. There was a pond in Sam's yard, a hole really, four by three by three, unfit for swimming. The builders of the house long ago decided a modest pond would sound right nice but figured anything more would be unconscionable, given the proximity of real ponds and the big river. The town was small but thought itself important enough for full-sized pools, and so Sam's hole was strange, out-of-place, a flooded White Rabbit aperture lipped by rocks and the yellowing brick pathway. All that was fine by Sam, preferable even, as the pond was blocked from the road by the slope of the yard and a never-trimmed hedgerow. It was only exploring neighbor children, politicos, or salesmen come to the sidedoor who stumbled across Sam's pond. And when the neighbor gave up his yard work and retreated inside, as he did now, Sam was alone. He trundled down the rock

steps into the Hendera beds, wading toward the hole. It served as a goldfish pool, an outdoor tank, and bred mosquitoes in summer.

Squirrels wrestled in the Scarlet Oak, and Sam stretched his neck to find them above, knowing them by their screams. One neared him, scampering down the tree. Sam bounded after it around the pond, his ankles pulling up and dragging ivy as he went. He had no real intention of catching the squirrel but lunged nonetheless. He slipped, ricocheted off the rocks, legs kicking. There was a splash, the golden and fat fish fleeing, a bellied scramble, nose to the rock, and like *that* he was out of the water, hardly wet, barely wet though his leg had fully submerged, bruises peppering along ribs and forearms, defying the water. *I am not even wet*.

In the rushing quiet of returning boredom Sam noticed roly-polies among the hendera—little tanks, one knocked onto its back, wiggling its plump legs, legs like humming strings, and there was the violent desire to eat one. Sam sent a hand back into the pool, a lost shoe stuck in the decaying oak leaves, a miniature bog. Shoe saved, Sam rolled off the rocks onto his back. The grand scarlet oak leaned over pond and house alike, casting fingers through the air. Sam could not discern where the tree ended, its top distant and tangled. Beyond, the sky was like soapy water, awash in cloud. So far away.

Startled, Sam heard a large bubble plop in the pond and swung his head in time to see a dark mud-cloud surface. Sam squished his hardly wet sock into the retrieved shoe and rolled to stare into the water. The goldfish materialized out of the

shallow depths like bathtoys, growing in the dirtied water. Sam paused to think, the Scarlet Oak's shadows scattering over him. He frowned, feeling finally the scrapes along his ribs, the tickle of blood down his ankle.

2.

Sam hunched. The television shouted. He was eating shaved corn. He shoveled the corn into a pile, butter slipping through his fork. Sam's father had heated things, had used the microwave, so that the melamine plate was hot to touch. Sam was hungry. There would be a potato in six minutes and perhaps a chewy chicken breast in ten. Sam's father tapped his dinner tray.

"This is a little fork."

"You want a big one?" Sam spoke through chewing.

"Yes," his father said. "Go and get it, please."

Sam swallowed, put his own fork back into his mouth, and carried it there into the green-tiled kitchen. He was barefoot and leery of roaches. He retrieved a larger fork from the heavy drawer, heaving his hip to shut it. The fork was green-plastic-handled. He swapped it with his father for the small one, hopping from the kitchen to the den. He turned and tossed the offending fork at the sink, clattering among the dishes.

"Did you throw that fork?"

"I tossed it." Sam returned to his end of the couch, hand-upholstered and old. A ceiling fan oscillated above them, its blades bouncing slowly. The television returned to shouting. Sam began to eat again.

"Why did you bring me a small one?" his father asked.

Sam said nothing, chewing.

"We have the small ones for small people. I'd like the big one. Please bring the big one next time."

Sam nodded.

"It's too small for me. It's for small people. Your father is big. You see how I can't use that one?"

"Yes."

"Say you're sorry."

"I'm sorry."

And then the power went off. The ceiling fan petered. The television popped mid-yell. The microwave and toaster were on the same circuit, the wiring circa 1979. Sam's father would have to flip the switches, numerous and incomprehensible. He heaved up and out of the room. The den was quiet. Chewing, Sam looked at the carpet's red, thin shag curling up at the basement door. The room had once been a car-port. That was before Sam, impossibly long ago. The floor beneath the carpet was hard and green. There was a lump near the sidedoor that Sam's father said was a dead snake. Sam thought it might only be a clumping of the carpet. Sam's feet were cold.

There was a vague smell of cat urine, since the litterbox was in a corner, sitting on newspapers. It was not unpleasant. Sam strained the melted butter through his fork, the oil separating into tiny pools, tiny ponds. All the corn was gone from his plate. Sam thought of exploring after dinner.

The basement was unfinished. There were cave crickets and spiders and mounds of mud with rocks. One stair could be removed, and there was a dirtier, darker alcove directly beneath the den. Sam was afraid of it. The basement flooded in rain. There was the rush of rainwater through jury-rigged tin pipes, meant to save the foundation. The cats would go there to hunt or die. It smelled fine to Sam, like lint and gasoline. There was a catdoor to the basement that flapped near the litterbox. Sam had dreams of escaping burglars by squeezing through it, though he was too big now. Now he would have to resort to stabbing them in the neck or back or cutting throats or hammering their eyeballs or squeezing temples until their heads popped. Sam licked the fork. His father had not returned. Cursing came from beyond the kitchen.

Suddenly, Sam heard noises outside. He put aside his plate, almost spilling butter onto the couch. He leapt to the middle of the room, facing the sounds. It was not, as he first believed, squirrels fighting in the scarlet oak, an exciting event itself. Soon Sam could make out murmurings. The walls were not thick, and during tornadoes, before his father led them downstairs, when the sky turned viridian and it rained but the weather radio had not yet said *touchdown*, Sam could hear the house creaking, shifting against itself, and he would listen for the cats crying in the rain,

wanting in. He longed to stay, to rescue them by flinging open the door, but his father said, *Damn the cats, we're to the basement*.

But now there was a voice, higher and younger than his own. Sam stood on the couch to peer out the screened windows. The blinds were poor, tan straw. They rolled up like photograph negatives or stamps. Sam pulled the cord with a hiss and snap. The sun was brilliant as it set, colored ginger and mustard. It illuminated the goldfish, sideyard and pond, the neighbors' darkened windows. The hushings outside died away. Sam's eyes adjusted. He made out two figures, tiny, weak, sticklike, connected at the shoulders, leaning over the pond. They did not see him.

Sam hopped down off the couch and began towards the kitchen, his father still hacking and coughing from the storage closet, fuddling with the switches, his legs leaning out from around the brooms and dustpans and AC filters. His father broke something and swore. Sam stopped. He spun, creeping to the sidedoor, unlocking and turning the knob. He pushed past the screendoor and gazed, barefoot, into the warm evening. The bodies, down below, still had not heard him over the cicadas and their own whisperings. Sam inched around the berried holly, not disturbing its flat leaves, down the two steps and into the hendera, cool about his ankles. The brick path was ridged against his heels and the kudzu tickled his high arches. He was ten feet from them, unseen. Sweat began to tingle along his head.

"What are you doing?" Sam said, flanking them. The figures started.

One, already backing and wild-eyed, lisped, "Fishing. So what."

It was Maury, a younger boy from the next block. He clutched a green aquarium net, brandishing it. Maury had no father, and a hole under his fence meant his hound Cybil could be seen digging things in strangers' yards. Once, Sam had seen it fleeing the old man across the street, fear on its flat face.

"Maury, you can't fish here." Sam turned his hands out apologetically. He noticed the other hidden behind Maury, slinking, genderless, dark. "Those are our fish. There're only four. They're expensive at the store."

"Store? I heard your father is so poor he took these from the creek. I heard he didn't even fish them out. He doesn't *have* a fishing pole. He used his hands."

Sam took a step towards Maury, who fell back, shrinking, his eyes casting, sibilant. The other was so small now Sam could not see it behind Maury.

"Look—"

"You leave me alone!" Maury hissed, fumbling violently. "You're going to hit me! Your father does that, too. My mom told it!" The twilight had faded. The scarlet oak cast mauve shadows on the green hendera. Maury's elbows were flayed awkwardly. His arm, wet from a plunge into Sam's sacred pool, waived the net. Sam was much bigger, though perhaps only a year was between them. "Your dad's pathetic. Everyone sees him. My mom says he's fat and lazy. You're just like him. Look at your dirty house, dirty yard. Keep your fish, your stupid pond!"

Sam rushed Maury. The other child, thing, was forgotten, shoved to the ground, stepped upon, a mere shadow among the hendera, curling now to hide itself, sink into the ivy, a botanical womb. Sam leapt for Maury's nose but was clumsy and

unsure. The fishing net tumbled through the air, smashing Sam's forehead. Sam was knocked to the ground, gasping and chomping amid the hendera and rocks. Jumping the hidden steps in one leap, Maury's blond head vanished through the crape myrtles into the drainage ditch, a triumphant yelp from his throat. Sam struggled to stand, pain about his head. He ran his fingers over his scalp. Pink blood thinned on them. Sam refused to cry. He fingered the exact wound, the bubbled flesh under grainy hair. It was fine. He had meant little harm, only to end Maury, who deserved as much for profaning the pond. Perhaps there had been the desire to pluck Maury's limbs one by one, but Sam wouldn't have admitted it. The pond, hole, was perhaps the one thing worth protecting, ancient, secret.

"Sam?" Sam's father barked from the house. The voice seemed very far away. Sam smiled bitterly. Then something strange happened. Sam remembered the second figure, the shadow swept aside in the struggle. There it was, sprawled near the pond. The creature examined him, and he it. Its dark swaddlings wrapped about what seemed pale skin in the evening light. It wore black, thin and light, and its limbs seemed to submerge completely in the hendera. A secretive thought graced Sam's mind. He staggered toward the figure, searching his voice.

"I'm sorry. I—"

The shape said nothing, only hiding its face as Sam neared.

"Sammy?" his father bellowed now, far closer, in the den perhaps, in a moment to look out a window or the door. Sam hurried towards the prone figure. He

sought to touch it, to raise it, to save it from his father. Only now did it recoil, shrink, inching out of reach in the hendera, sliding across the ivy like a cat on its belly.

"You don't understand. He can't see you now. He's angry." Sam darted, and again the figure jerked, rising to its knees. Sam saw soft skin where dark fabric ended. "You mean you won't—you won't let me *help* you?" But the figure was mute, its features opaque beneath black hair shining in the dissolving twilight. There was but one shadow from the scarlet oak now.

"Sam!" his father was at the door, but Sam had jumped, snatched at the form, grabbing it, linking himself to it forever, the figure at his shoulder as they ran along the hidden, yellowing brick path, down the ivied stairs, around the back of the house to the basement door. Sam knew he had not been seen, or there would have come a larger cry.

"You'll have to be quiet. I can't hide you unless." Sam stopped to reexamine the shape, remembering now that it had not spoken. Even from a foot away he could not see its eyes, only a thin, mute mouth, and the night had swallowed the twilight now so that Sam almost tripped before the door. Cicadas droned and Sam's voice was thin. "What's your name?"

The thin mouth seemed to muse, pinching together twice.

"That's fine. Tell me later, after—" What he had in mind he could not say, a thousand instinctive possibilities. Sam reached for the figure's hand, finding slight black fabric instead, pulling it into the dark basement.

It was calm after the outside, calm in black silence save the hummings of crickets and cicadas floating under the door as Sam eeked it shut. “Careful about stepping on spiders or cave crickets.” His bare feet glowed pale in the pitch. Sam’s father’s footsteps creaked above them, were moving about angrily. “Now, tell me quickly—” Only the creature had disappeared before Sam could turn. He was bewildered and stretched his hands in the darkness. Nothing. Sam scanned for the thin mouth, seeing only the house’s brick and concrete foundation, the piled trash, the broken television. “Hey!” Sam whispered. Still nothing. Sam tensed. What had he brought into the house? A tinny, ethereal voice came from his left, from the alcove beneath the planked stairs, one clearly lifted, the mouth floating in its place, barely moving, hardly moving at all to speak.

“Is your father mean?”

“Yes,” Sam whispered in return. *Yes, yes, yes* he thought.

3.

He was afire, his skin warm, his head feverish. He trembled. Sam hurried, his father to yell, lies to invent. The creature was feminine, though that mattered little to Sam. It was the empathy, the sharing of facts, the quick spill. He had almost been shouting his name to her, *her*, in a tumbled rush, she saying nothing after *Is your father mean?* only encouraging him, guiding him with a mute twist of mouth, as if to say, *This is where you tell me of your lost mother*, *this of your dreams*, *this of who you want me to be*. Sam apologizing, “I’m sorry. I must leave. He’s waiting!” Her

nod, and Sam would come and claim her when he could, so thankful—friendship bursting out of the shadows, a spasm of hope and happiness.

Sam clomped up the stairs, heaved open the door. *How long had it been? How long?* Sam couldn't say. The den was dark and smelled of cat urine. A deeper blackness blotted the door to the kitchen.

"The sidedoor was left open," Sam's father said, turning. He held a tall lighted candle. Wax slid into a ring about its base. The pulse of the flame darkened his nostrils and eye-sockets, showed his sharp cheeks and chin. "Did you go out?"

"Yes."

"I was worried about you. The power's out and you leave the door open."

"Yes."

"And you won't tell me why?"

"I will. There were voices—a voice. Maury from down the street—the one with the hideous mother—"

"That's mean, Sammy, mean."

"He was fishing for the goldfish. I chased him, but he ran into the ditch, so I came in the back way."

"You left the door open—the AC—"

"The power's out—there's no AC."

"You let the cool out then." His father stepped into the den.

"There wasn't time."

"No time to close the door?" Sam said nothing as his father approached, his gray skin floating in the darkness. "You look red. You sure you didn't catch him, maybe have a fight?" Sam said nothing. "Did he hit you? You didn't want me to know?" Sam waited. The candle glow spilled over his father's face. His eyes were sunken, submerged. The head seemed to have no hair. It hovered towards Sam in the gloom.

"I tried," Sam said.

"You left the door open."

"Yes."

"The cool. It's all out now."

"Yes."

"You see I'm sweating."

"Yes."

"The little fork, Sammy. You brought me the little fork." Sam's father hulked, massive in the black, his dimensions amorphous, warped. "You have lied to me and let the cool out. Get to your room, with all practicable speed."

…

Sam awoke hungry, thinking of the half-thawed potato, the still-frozen chicken breast, the power off. Had he fled his father, screaming, or had he sauntered, defiant, to his room? It was unimportant, a matter of pride really. His pillow was salty and wet. Perhaps he had been crying, or maybe someone had done it for him out of kindness, courtesy, decorum, understanding of symbolism. The corners of Sam's eyes

were strained. He rubbed them and his face was hot. Sam remembered the wraith. She was alone with the cave crickets and Daddy Longlegs. Would she wait for him? He looked to the wall clock, still ticking, bouncing when all other life had slowed. Hours had passed. His chest leaped, but his muscles were tired, hesitant, and he feared she was gone, knew she was gone. He wrestled and willed himself onto his feet. His toes plopped against the cold floor.

He sulked to the door, cracked it, and peered into the dim hallway, the floor groaning with his stomach. There was a diploma on the wall, but it was Sam's mother's. Without the hall light, it was in shadow. He could not see far, but the door to his father's room was closed, and he was emboldened. Sam scuttled down the hall, halting only an instant to glance around a corner, flying through the kitchen, ignoring his hunger and the temptation to open the fridge, jumping almost into the den, and there was his father, head up, eyes open. No. Closed, sleeping. The eyes seemed to roll behind their lids—trick of the darkness. Sam discovered he was already inching past. What bravery was in his heart? His muscles knew hope when his mind did not. He reached the basement door, still open. A damp, colder air came out of the deeper darkness, up the curving stair. Suddenly, the power returned. One flash and the house moaned to life.

4.

Clean, oppressive light coursed the stairs. The single, uncovered bulb above Sam popped and hummed. Sam dashed, bounded into the basement before his father

could wake, could halt him, demand from him. He sailed the missing stair, whispering *Girl?! Girl?!*

Sam's face twisted. He cast about the alcove, daring it out of necessity, climbing in and contorting out. There was nothing but trash, newsprint, an old *Southern Dream* magazine. He searched the basement proper. There were eyes in the deep, flashes out of a distant corner. Sam's chest leapt, but as he approached, the cat fled, playful. He pulled open the door and peered into the cicadaed evening. There was movement and Sam's pulse bumped, but it was only a squirrel, jaunting among the crape myrtles. He pressed shut the door, his cheeks tight, a pain behind his tongue. Conquering the stairs, he surveyed the den. His father had not stirred and was smaller, frailer, older in sleep and in the clean light. His eyes were not rolling. His chin doubled against his chest, lips puffed, his belly big and soft, hands crossed before him. He whistled as he breathed, and Sam saw his wispy, fading hair. Had Sam paled before *this*? The father was nothing compared to Sam's disappointment. His chest was trampled.

Sam passed the man, not bothering to sneak, jerked the sidedoor, its frame rattling. He exited, glaring at the pond a moment, hoping, daring to see the figure curled in the hendera. The goldfish circled the pond, mouthing *no*s. The screendoor slammed behind him, surely waking his father, but Sam was already running, lighting through the hendera growth, along the brick pathway. He missed the hidden stairs, his ankle twisting, the white bricks ripping at the flesh of his calf. He hardly paused, taking the remaining steps in a leap, at a sprint now. Sam threw himself into the

drainage ditch, half expecting Maury to flee before him, a crab ahead of the tide. The sewage trickled quietly through the ditch, and Sam wore no shoes. There was nothing for it. Sam surged forward, splashing toward the only place the wraith could be—where it came from.

…

Insects swarmed the streetlamps, making flowing beards on the downcast lights. Sam's feet flapped on the sparkling asphalt. In the northern sky the big moon frowned at Sam, who should have been in bed. He plodded towards Maury's house, small, wood-fenced, inhabited by the wicked. He leaned himself against the fence, breathing through his mouth. The wood felt feeble, pliable against Sam's shoulder. He turned, pushed, took heart seeing an obstacle bend before him. The wood began to crack and Sam stopped. There would be a quieter way. He walked the length of the fence. Maury's dog had dug a tunnel. Sam could squeeze it and did, scraping his back terribly and perhaps tearing his shirt. Sam was bigger, scarier than he thought, capable of things he hadn't believed—such as this. His feet glowed pale. Dirt lined his toes, caked between the nails. He scrambled erect, into the yard, half-expecting Maury's haggish mother to be there waiting, finger crooked in accusation, but there was no one, and the house lights were off. Sam breathed-in the rhythm of the cicadas and crickets. The dog Cybil was absent, and there was food in her bowl, hard green pellets as of horse-feed. Sam was reminded of hunger.

The yard was barren, the dog-house dilapidated, a rusted table and chair underneath a discolored umbrella. Dogwoods invaded the yard from the east, stepping

over and even through the fence. Had Sam approached from that direction he could have squeezed through upright. He felt the scrapes along his back. His flesh had balled like clay. There were clogged gutters on the house, leaves from a massive oak damming and spilling over them. It was a single story, and Sam thought briefly of climbing onto the roof, of stomping his way through to an attic, of reaching and rescuing his secret shade, a smile on her blank mouth, a tearful eye somewhere under the black hair.

Sam crept through the dusty yard towards the house. There was a sliding glass door, though little could be seen through it. It had yellowed with age, as church glass does. Sam made out a television, ancient with an actual dial, a blinking clock—time suspended—a couch even more depressed than his own, brown or dark red. He tried the latch, but it was tight and would not slide. Sam pushed harder. His shoulder bowed the glass and there was a popping noise as it concussed. Sam bounded away lest he be seen as well as heard.

Minutes of human quiet and there was no sign from the house. Sam swept around the building, seeking low-lying windows. He found two, one shut with the blinds down. The other near the oak was open, its two panes like double doors, inviting save for a bug screen. Sam could not lift himself to see inside. He had to be satisfied with jumping. This he did and was quickly out of breath. Just at the point of despair a hiss came at him from the window.

"Fish-thief! Bastard!" Maury shot into the night. "Just like your daddy. I'll wake mom. You'll regret it."

"No, Maury, wait!" Sam said. There was movement above him beyond the screen. Maury said nothing, but Sam knew he had not left. "I've come… for her. Give her to me!"

"I didn't take any goldfish, I swear!"

"No, Maury, *her*… the black-haired girl with you."

Maury did not respond. Sam waited, breathless.

"Leave, Sammy. I'm getting mom now." Maury's voice had changed, was calm, what Sam heard as possessive. Sam knew he had not left, knew he was looking down at him, laughing maybe. Maybe not. Maybe not laughing at all.

"Maury… please!" A muted cry gurgled out of the heart of him. Sam wrung his hands. Nothing more came from the window.

On his way in Sam didn't even glance at the hendera and pond. Sam's father was nowhere. The lights were on. Sam was starved and lurched into the kitchen, dirty feet footprinting the floor. He found what he sought, a half-eaten apple, browning in the refrigerator. He ravished it and stumbled to his room.

5.

When Sam awoke he realized first he was famished and tired, as if he had slept only minutes. Then he noticed his feet were clean, even his toes. Had his father

carried him to a sink and cleaned him, prepared him for bed? Impossible! His father meant meanness, injustice. It was cowardly to harbor secret kindness. Sam thrust his feet into his shoes, stomping. When he went out, there were pancakes waiting for him in the living room, and his father had poured orange juice in an old jelly glass. Sam fumed as he ate, watching his father, who said nothing, who only placidly read the newspaper, his skin shiny and clean, his hair combed. Sam swallowed faster than he could chew. Finally he slammed down his glass.

"Oh, just say it already!"

"Say what, son?"

Sam fled outside, throwing his fork into the sink on his way. The morning sun was blinding, watering his eyes. Squirrels quarreled in the scarlet oak. Sam sought the hendera. Might she be there? Might he will her into existence? His legs rushed mechanically, hurrying him around the holly bush. Stretching his eyes and mind about, Sam tangled his feet on the steps. His arms grasped for the hendera and he fell.

He had braced himself well, rolled over. Still, his back stung, a reminder of his frantic scramble last night. He sank himself deep into the hendera, his belly and knees poking above the bed like a bay leaf from a stew. All around him rose the smell of ivy. Across the sideyard the lawnmower lay tipped, dozing. Suddenly, there came a FLOP from the pond. It was disturbed leaves, trapped gas bubbling from below. The water seemed purple to Sam as he scrambled over. The upturned scarlet oak glassed the surface. Sam leaned closer, ignoring his ribs and the sharp-rock edges. He neared his nose to the water, saw baby mosquitoes bouncing like shrimp, the goldfish eating

them. He saw ripples from the bubble still concussing. He saw himself as a darkened shade, hair black in reflection. There his eyes were hidden, his mouth a simple line.

The History of the World

Only in the South could February be so hot. Sam knew by the stick of his white legs to the leather bus seat that the afternoon would bring heating showers, that the new, almost purple asphalt would swell, eating the water, that with each step rubber soles would seem to fuse with the tarry street, and that black would surpass red or blue as the worst color to wear. No matter how slowly things moved, no matter how gingerly you stepped, somebody would end up yelling on the school bus, and you would trudge the last few blocks home with a tension headache. It would be that kind of heat and rain later in the afternoon.

"I like your backpack," Josh said, only he pronounced it *Jawrsh*. "I'd like to have it." They had never spoken, but Josh sat a row behind Sam every day, often sipping or spilling milk.

"You would?" Sam turned to look. The boy had round eyes, a smooth forehead, high hairline. His clothes were big for him, stretched from some ancient yank so that his clavicle pushed out, hairless, black, and shiny. He was slighter than Sam but taller, since Sam hunched. The green backpack was given to Sam by his father, who had grinned to show him all the useless pockets and zippers and clips and crannies, each one a lavish dollar or five. *What the hell* his father had said when he made sure Sam saw the still-attached price tag, as if Sam wanted the backpack, as if he should be thankful to have a backpack made for hiking trails. When he walked, its flaps flapped around Sam's rear. He was aware of looking ridiculous.

"Yes. Wish I had it." Josh shuffled his things on his lap—an empty blue carton of school milk, an umbrella, an unruly stack of tattered books, loose-leaf paper. All would easily fit in the backpack. Josh's face was ugly in that it was soft and weak-chinned. Perhaps the face would not be ugly to a woman or anyone else, but Sam did not like it. There were dark-on-dark freckles under his eyes.

"You want a normal one. This is too big." Sam shifted, the stored books biting his lumbar.

"I'd take it."

The school bus was crowded, and Sam's neighbor, a softish girl, squirmed against his legs, the only white legs on the bus. Sam leaned away to separate, the backpack crunching against the seat. Noticing, his neighbor yawned and turned her back, prattling across the aisle to a second girl—something about someone having the nerve to do something—and Sam lost interest in her disappeared mouth. A pink tank top stretched at the arch of her back but fell loose at her waist. Her neck swept down from hair twisted and clipped with barrettes. Tiny black curls stabbed out at him from the nape of her neck—dark, accusing fingers. Sam's eyes fled to the bright window. It would be a hot day, would rain.

The sky would remain cloudless blue, even as it poured thick, warm drops, even as it thundered calmly, and if you were outside to see the new asphalt swell, you could find the bottoms of car tires submerged or a dead bird's tiny legs pushing up, and you could hope that he's not dead and lift him, but he would be quite dead and you would sink him all the way in for decency. But Sam would see none of it, being

windowless after lunch, sent deep into the school for biology and chemistry—subjects that could only be studied after descending dark staircases.

Last week a girl's water broke on the stairs. It was discolored and bloody until a janitor, a principal, somebody with some basic civility decided to clean it.

Again, his leg brushed the softish girl, and again she noticed, turning further away, this time only a hiccup in her storytelling.

The second girl, the pretty listener across the aisle, laughed about something somebody had the nerve to do. Her hair was pulled straight and swept off her forehead to the left, wrapping under an ear. It was uniform black and moved directly, like a brushstroke. Her eyelids were sleepy as she smiled, glittery pink eye shadow rolling up into her head as she opened them. Part of Sam longed to interrupt, to laugh about someone's nerve, to transition an introduction magically into a love affair with this softish one beside him or perhaps the prettier listener, pressed against a locker, a health text opened comically to diagrams, since he'd need instructions. These things happened, apparently, if water was breaking on staircases. But it was all impossible with this backpack and his white legs and the horrible heat.

"Yes, sir," Josh mumbled, "that's a rich backpack."

***

The bus slowed, turning a corner onto Park Street. The long, straight, yellow caravan waited, a disjointed caterpillar along one side of the street, a space reserved for Sam's bus. Beyond Park's new asphalt began dim wilderness, ghetto—treeless and wild. Boarded and barred and desert bushes with thorns. And black folks.

The bus rocked to a halt, passing exhaust. Most everyone already stood, softish and listener edging into the aisle. It was impossible to do comfortably, the shiny brown seats extending into the backs of knees, so Sam waited while the girls distanced him, their voices diminishing as they debarked, shading their eyes and scowling at the school. It was large, majestic, columned, made of brick and concrete, single-paned windows with no weather stripping. Sam could only see the lower half of it from the far side of the bus. There were gradual stairs to double doors beyond a dry fountain, and above were four high, gray, busty statues inscribed as Greek virtues. The students all crushed into the front doors, the best bottleneck for the metal detectors. The high school was historic, the site of a segregation conflict in the 50s, screaming and dogs and hoses, the National Guard and Eisenhower's legacy. It was a working national monument, long since desegregated, mostly. Sam was white and on the bus, so the bus was desegregated.

It was also alive with black voices in further rows—since even voices have color when you have none, and since your voice becomes somehow blackface, when you talk to black folks, it's often best to shut up, which is what Sam did. A round face a few rows behind Sam, beyond Josh even, turtled out of a Starter jacket despite the weather. The face shouted rap lyrics against the heat, wearing earmuff headphones, hands knifing the air, ring and middle fingers crossed in Vs, wrists bouncing.

"Here *I* come, here *we* come, here *they* come, to go!"

Corners of his mouth had spittle, and Sam didn't look at him long.

***

Sam camped in homeroom. It was math, taught by the lisping black man Sam respected. He sat near the front. They watched a video rather than learning Geometry. The class had been commandeered by school administrators, the hour and a half stolen from the math teacher (and every other homeroom instructor) and given over to history. Students treated the class as a free period, playing spades, walking about, though there must have been some who were paying attention or just enough attention, or perhaps the problem was that they weren't paying any attention at all. The video was on the life of Martin Luther King Jr. as today was his and Robert E. Lee's birthday, or at least it was celebrated today—marked on the calendar even, *M L King and R E Lee Day*. It was not a holiday.

"Not interested in the video, Sammy?" Mr. Murray, the lisper, had looked up from his calculations, but no one else acknowledged the man had spoken. Sam was in the front row.

"Oh, I saw it on the History Channel last year." His father had been snoring for hours in the orange recliner when Sam stretched out on the shag carpet, the glow of the television a teenage nightlight. The video was narrated by a voice deep, educated, simmering. Sam missed fifteen minutes halfway through, having a dream that he found one of the cats dead, crumpled in a corner, but when he awoke, the narrator talking now of determination, disobedience, Sam saw it was only a dirty towel, lumpy against the shelves. But then Sam was awake while the TV pulsed.

The classroom lights were dimmed, and he listened again to the voice.

At last, though a century had yielded John Brown, Jim Crow, Sambo, Topeka, Selma, Bates, King, Malcolm, Ellison, and Ali, our generation had seen a lifting of "the veil." No one would deny now what desires thrive in the souls of black folk…

"Tell me then Sam, is it worth missing Pythagoras and Euclid?" Murray was ashen-haired, chubby, with big hands that he folded behind his head, stretching.

"I'm not sure. Don't we all know this stuff already?" Sam opened a palm at the TV on wheels. "I mean, you'd think *these* people…" Sam turned to the class. A large girl to Sam's right slapped a king onto the pile, a few cards sliding off one of the four desks pulled together for a table.

"Yes, you would," said Murray, but he was back to his text, his tongue out a corner of his mouth.

Sam listened again to the video voice, but he had reading to do, pushing it away. Sam bent over his European history text, scanning the pages. The onion-skinned tome called itself *The History of the World*. There was undoubtedly a quiz coming, as there was every day. He had not read the asiigned chapter the night before and had only cracked it on the bus ride to school, propping one nubby corner against the window frame, an excuse to avoid Josh's indomitable eye. He had not thought about when he expected to read it, during lunch perhaps. He had merely trusted that he would find time, that time would be allowed him for it. Things like this worked out for Sam. Cosmic privilege.

***

Lunch, and it was hot but had not yet begun to rain. Students spread into a donut around the school. Sam ate with his acquaintances, white and Asian, in a loose oval on the concrete amphitheater stairs. They overlooked the misshapen weedy field, brown with stubborn patches of yellow grass, dandelions and grasshoppers, which doubled for football practice and co-ed whiffleball. On it the black students milled. A few showed off back-flips and acrobatics, taking long running starts with quick steps. Only one or two fell and appeared to have violent injuries at first, but the boys stood, perhaps wincing an arm, always brushing off help and affirming their skill by repeating a few minutes later and more carefully the same maneuver. Patches of strawberry-skinned arms were visible even from Sam's distance. The boys did this every day during the warm weather. There were stickers and needle plants in that field. Hands must occasionally land in the sticker-plants, mid-flip, but none of the boys evinced more than brief defeat, and all would leave lunch as heroes.

Music played over a stereo, rapid, dance-club, and a few black girls tried different routines, hips shaking, laughing. Like most things, stereos were not allowed at school, but someone had not only brought one but had found an extension cord and a socket. Sam chewed calmly. He needed to finish reading the Euro chapter, but time would be allowed him to finish it.

There was a raindrop, a tiny thud amid the mess of his hair. Above were clear, bright skies, paining his eyes. Sam turned downward, eating his ham-and-cheese-and-pickle-and-mayonnaise-and-onion sandwich, examining the concrete before him, studying it as a problem, a non-uniform, heterogeneous mixture. He finished his

grapes, crumpling the paper sack. He rose, hesitating. The closest trashbin was in the middle of the back-flippers and music, the teeming black crowd.

He plunged down, avoiding other lunchers, his green backpack slapping at him. There was a hustle and flash somewhere to Sam's left, a buzz, an excitement, though Sam did not look. Things happened. A few black voices shouted, but still Sam stepped carefully, afraid to fall and injure his arms or knees on the amphitheatre concrete. A whistle was trilling now. Security guard stopping a fight. Sam trod at last onto the soft dirt and trampled grass, sliding his way through the quickening bodies, pushing his brown sack over the lip of the hard, yellow bin.

Then Sam looked about for the source of the disturbance. He had missed something, something important that he should not have missed. Black bodies spun him around, running. There were piercing and metallic shouts careening past his head. Cries, hollerings. The blackness around him was of bodies, human bodies, closely packed. He was bumped from behind.

"Give it here," someone coughed.

He meant to say excuse me, thinking he was in the way of something. All around him were flashing teeth and white eyes, fists. Sam looked violently toward where his acquaintances sat. They were laughing, though one frowned and pointed down towards him. Without warning, Sam's backpack was heaved, hauled up above him, thrusting him forward, bending him. Hard hands, strong hands, much stronger than him, yanked the backpack and his shirt over his head. Sam began to laugh, thinking wrongly. Humid air struck his flank, the backs of his ribs. He was white and

a bit fat and began to feel embarrassed. The first blow startled him. It was a practical joke meant for somebody else. The punch glanced across the back of his hip, as if the swinger misaimed or was uncertain. Sam's hair was fussed by his shirt, the backpack grinding into his head. He began to frown and then the second blow stood him, straightening his back. It was bright, even under the shirt, and Sam squinted. Someone kicked the side of his knee, a hard kick, meant to fell. Suddenly, he was aware of pain.

He did fall. The blows came fast along his back and neck, one on the crown of his head, slapping blows.

"Give! Give!" Shouts and feral curses. Sam could not pick out the words. They were heated, foreign. Give what? Sam huffed out of his mouth, mangling his tongue. Someone leaned low and shouted into Sam's ear, teeth gnashing, a blow to his shoulder with each syllable, though he still could not make out what the voice said. He, eternal *Sam*, was suddenly in it. It involved him. He could yell back or ask questions if only he knew what the voice said. Sam felt the ground now, fearing stickers in the field grass. Shoes kicked his rear and one his side, lightly but shockingly, since he was defenseless. He was wild now, turned wild, as if the fat on his bones weighed nothing. His shirt was still over his head, a hand wrenching and holding it there. Sam heaved his hands out of the backpack straps, free at last. He could grab the oppressive hand, tear it off, carry it around as a trophy. A black shoe stepped near his eyes. He lunged for it, hoping to rip the toes from the feet, to bite the ankle, but it was gone. Sam was wild but feeble. The hand released him.

The feet that had been whirling around him were gone. The quick scuffles dispersed, clopping up the concrete stairs. The voices and shouting had not diminished but had passed him. Sam smelled grass and sweat, his own perhaps. His mouth was dry and his tongue thick. Grass poked his belly and he breathed hard. His wrists were moist. Sam blinked, ready almost to raise himself.

Someone stomped hard onto Sam's back. Somehow this was suddenly degrading. Sam was squeezed to the ground again, though he had gathered himself enough to grunt, an unintelligible groan, perhaps something out of that primordial speak that had been yelled, shouted into him. He fumbled his shirt down from around his head in time to see people fleeing, one a dark turtle head out of a Starter jacket holding a green backpack aloft and upside down, Sam's things and *The History of the World* splattering onto the old sidewalk asphalt.

Sam got to his knees. His nose bled. His back was bruised. His knee throbbed, but he was fine. It was not a big deal. Another raindrop. It was a shame to go inside. He could stay out here. It wasn't a big deal. Consider for a moment the larger picture.

***

Sam blinked, dusted from the field. He looked for his acquaintances but they had fled. That was fortunate. His bag was gone with the turtler. The horde was gone now, too, the last stragglers jumping and shouting, big grins, skipping practically, as if what was happening was glorious, as if all the rules had been stricken, as if the world had turned upside down and everything would be better sitting on the ceiling. Security whistles trilled. The music was still playing, angry, dancehall. Sam winced,

examining himself, feeling hurt now. His clothes were soiled, stretched. His shirt had been yanked and his clavicle showed, pink, shiny. Blood eked from his nose. He raised his hand to wipe it, to forgive his nose for bleeding.

A face eyed him from the concrete steps, ten, fifteen paces away, weak-chinned, freckled, clutching a piece of bread in the fingers of the left hand as if it were precious. The face contorted. The boy seemed to hesitate, turning his shoulders.

"Who?" Sam spat, pointing after the turtle head. He knew who it was, but Josh said nothing, following Sam's finger with his eyes.

There was another raindrop, and the big blue sky looked like it could swallow tiny Sam whole.

"It was a rich backpack," the boy said.

Josh turned decisively and ran away, ran skillfully after the turtle head, ran up the concrete steps that Sam had been so careful to navigate, ran after the shouts, perhaps shouting too, and Sam was left alone with his dirtied, blackened legs, feeling somehow guilty.

***

"And you say he wore a black Starter jacket, had headphones? You knew this boy?" asked the severe black man, the principal who got his job by being severe and who Sam believed would retain it always, long after by rights he should have retired or died.

"Yes, though I don't want—" Sam was suddenly exhausted. He had been thinking for a time now about what he wanted.

"I know who this boy is. Marvin Jenkins, yes?" The man's hands, resting on the edge of the desk with palms outward, began to rub together, their fingers curled, index against middle, middle against ring. The man's wrists were boney and sharp against the desk.

"Yes, I believe that's his name, but—"

"Yes, rest assured that those who did this will be punished. We will tolerate no hate crimes here."

"Yes, Mr. Thurman, it's just that there were several more, and he's the only one I saw—" There were twenty more, but that was not it. He had meant to say something else.

"Yes, well, don't worry. He'll tell us who else was involved. Now go on get back to class. The nurse tells me you're fine and you say you don't want to go home." He hadn't thought about going home or telling his father, but it was not a question.

Sam began to object, hoping to communicate something, though the man's eyes were fixed on his fingers twisting against themselves. He had the look of fanaticism about him, the absolute obedience to rules and laws and a love for them as the only things solid and guiding, and perhaps they were. He wore a white shirt, a black tie. His office was white, and carbon copies were attached to all the man's papers. The room smelled of peaches, several pits in the trashcan to the side of his desk. The man's jaw worked. He shooed Sam away, only half rising from his chair, as if to conduct urgent and desperate business that wouldn't be understood. Sam felt sorry for him, though he did not wait around to show it. The man was gripping the

edge of his desk. Sam could understand that. Racial tension at *his* school. This school, with its history, on *this* day. It would be dreadful. Parents would complain. White students would transfer. There must be decisive punishment today, and severe, as was his natural inclination.

Sam had hoped to avoid all this, but he had been pulled from the hallway, stumbling or looking beaten perhaps, his green backpack with its pockets and crannies and zippers gone from his back, Sam instead balancing *The History of the World* and his other things against a hip. The lisping math Murray had seen him and cared for him. That was unfortunate for Jenkins. Still, Sam was too tired to spend any more energy feeling guilty.

***

Sam was jerked awake by a hand inching along his head. He must have jumped because the hand lifted. Sam tried to keep reading but his eyes couldn't focus in the happy dark. The hand and its fingers calmly returned, pinching and sliding along strands of his hair, dragging them upward cautiously. The digits felt foreign and were, given that it had been several days since anybody had touched Sam kindly. This was a feminine way, a most feminine way, a way that sent a pull through him, like someone tugging a light-bulb chain. It was chemistry, the pits, the bowels of the building, but the administration had decided to steal another hour to replay the Dr. King video, since so many missed its message. Students treated this second hour like the first, and Sam began to finish his Euro reading. It was a particularly long chapter

in *The History of the World*. The French were chopping off heads. White heads. Sam's head.

The video's big narrative voice washed over Sam again, a hint of anger this time.

Talk became action, action became protest, protest became a movement, and movement became law.

A separate voice floated over Sam's shoulder, the hand resting on his head.

"Such pretty hair."

Palms now settled above his ears, fingers met and locked at the summit. It was electric. Sam straightened as if hearing his name, gazing upward and back. He hurt, but he tried not to show it. The girl's soft face was looking away, her own hair a brushstroke across her forehead. Her cheek puffed pleasantly below the ear. Sam could see the muscles in her neck, long, circuitous. The hands still combed him. "Don't you like his hair?"

Another black girl from the bus, the other with the pink hair ties, looked at him and shrugged, her eyes bored, "You shouldn't like his hair."

The prettier face returned, and Sam's eyes fled from it, unfocusing upon his textbook.

"But I like his hair."

He felt her standing over him, her fingers magic crayons coloring his head. Sam could hear his own hair rubbing and her breathing, steady, calm. She rested the back of his head against her stomach somewhere below her chest, playing with his

bangs, touching his forehead and almost his eyebrows with her fingertips. She tipped his head back. He closed his eyes, blinded by the fluorescent whites overhead. He decided to chance it. He blinked, squinting. Her face floated above him, nondescript, beautiful. She leaned close to his ear.

"I like your hair, Sam."

Then she was gone, and Sam tried to hold on with his mind alone, her hands resting for a moment on his shoulders, his head tilting in the new air. And his thoughts drifted into other areas, new avenues. If you have discovered something suddenly, money in your pocket or a toy thought long lost, anything really, you will know how Sam felt.

Sharp Wood

Sam's first girl was pretty—miniature hands, slippery hair, wet teeth. She was lithe and could fit into small spaces—his wallet, his head—like Sam under the time-out chair as a boy, camping and forting and farting. One day he was too big and forced to sit in it since you people said he lied. It was unreasonable and he wrongfully accused and too big to squeeze below the chair and having to plop solidly and not worm in it. As if he could look out over that poor room and not want. What did you expect? He couldn't argue because it was Time-Out and that meant shutting up, please. Some fundamental right had been broken, he thought. What had become of his father?

Now Sam had swelled out, almost his father's size, too large for forting, too large for the dorm beds, his ankles extending, cadaverous. He had dreams of taking this girl beneath a chair or inside a mattress or into an attic, a basement, a cellar, a hollowed-out tree trunk, a Tom Sawyer cave, a hobbit hole. There he would spill all his secrets into her. He would hear none of hers because this is when he woke, sweating, wrenching his neck to see if his roommate was feigning sleep, had overheard Sam's secrets, sentimental, sad, weak.

***

Mallory grinned as they walked, slipping her fingers inside his back pocket, front pocket. There were incidental people on porches up the hill, soon-naked cottonwoods veiling them. Perhaps they would see.

"First road trip," she whispered.

They were going camping, escaping during fall break to try their love in the small woods of southern Missouri. There they would camp and rent canoes and their hearts would be pried open as they resisted having sex. After all, Sam wanted to prove himself proper in everything because he thought that's what she wanted.

It was October and cold, the sky solid gray, but they hadn't thought about that. It would rain.

Her car was loaded, a red, stuffed tamale full of borrowed camping gear. They lived in adjacent dorms, rectangle and brick, the rows of cars between. Sam didn't own one and could not drive. He was afraid he would crush a small squirrel or have to work to pay for insurance, a bus-boy scarfing discarded pesto penne. He would not work like that again. Sam stalked her car, determined not to be intimidated by it or Mal.

"Tires look good," he said.

"Sure," Mal said. She held her tongue on the top of her mouth. She leaned over the hood at Sam. "But you wouldn't know anything about it." Sam loved everything about her when her shirt clung to her chest as it did now. He had loved her chest for the better part of two months.

Nothing but the trees moved, since why should things move? It had turned too cold for the bugs only today or perhaps yesterday.

"Think it'll rain?"

Sam didn't answer. He was remembering home—Central Arkansas and the Kingfisher Trail at Pinnacle Mountain, the dwarf rock lizard's detachable tail still

warm and camouflaged dragonflies gorging themselves on mosquitoes too small to see, and camping with his father at Lake DeGray with the great pine forests, their genesis in Virginia or who knows where, stretching even to his backyard, bringing the raccoons into the attic, horrifying him when he went in search of old books amid the rubbish, finding Ian Fleming paperbacks, *Ivanhoe*, and two bubonic eyes in the dark, the old throaty hiss in his own home! He learned to ride a bike at DeGray, the bike appearing when he had not remembered it packed, had not seen it before, wondering how his father had gotten it, and taking off the training wheels that afternoon because *What the hell* his father said and flying, flying down the twisty hill and not crashing. There were purple mosquitoes you could see and turdish June bugs and the smell of burned baked beans and the black-seated golden port-o-potty he was ashamed to use and his father, calm and steady, smoking quietly at the edge of the light where he thought Sam wouldn't see.

When was that? Sam couldn't remember years or ages, just as he couldn't remember names of trees or how to spell *restaurant*. He had mythologized the camping trips. As far as Sam was concerned, he had never crashed, not even the first time on the puny scarlet bike with the yellow grips, the wheels hard plastic with no traction and how to turn them and shouldn't he be wearing shoes, hands frozen to the corncob grips, but *What the hell* his father said so there. And when it stormed and the batteries on the weather radio went out and the tent leaked, his father bailed with an empty can while Sam slept, exhausted from conquering hills and bikes and himself. The bugs and the whole world bunkered down, loosened shoe-laces, stuck a toe off

the cot into the cool night, and Sam was safe. This would be just like that. No crashes. No rain in the tent. No training wheels.

Mal would eat Sam's splitting, campfired hotdogs and the canned spaghetti with the chunks of rubbery meat, still cold and convex after half an hour in the pan, and maybe a runaway cat would visit and they would feed and keep him, which happened once at Woolly Hollow when Sam was tiny, his mother along that time. She hated camping but had loved Sam's father. They had quarreled and there was no time-out chair, no door to slam. He paced the campsite, pretending to gather brush, thinking his mother had ruined the trip, and of course she had. That is until the cat crept, mewling into the edge of the firelight, calico, hungry, ready to be forgiven, to confess—I have been a wild and bad kitty, but I will eat your cold franks and pretend to love you. Mal was like Sam's mother in some ways, but it did not matter. He was not interested in Freud. Especially when she jerked the hair from her eyes—tanned hair, sunburned lids. The camp-cat years later had been hit, run over by his father's car as it swerved home, erased by some legerdemain, but Sam couldn't remember what that had looked like, either.

It was a four-hour drive to the campgrounds. The October wind hurried them into the car. With the doors closed it was quiet, and the car smelled of Mal, of hand lotion and shampoo, and he wasn't frightened by the car now that he was a passenger. Now that it served him. He might even be able to take hold of the wheel in an emergency. He thought he could do that, at least. Hold her steady, as his father had pinched his handlebars, laboring a bit because he was a big man and Sam threatened

to go fast and did. And the horse flies thumped into his head like hail, startling because his head was so small and the flies were full-sized, life-sized, and they buzzed. He was only keeping her steady down the twisty hill with no traction for *what the hell* and that was an awful lot to expect.

When his father went without him one June and returned with the heads of pigmy rattlers in a jar, their severed neckskins frayed and floating, Sam wondered why he had never seen one before and if his father had hunted them. Later that night, noises in the dark were proof of all things magical and that his father was a great man, big and strong, and of course they were and he was, once.

"How much will the canoes cost to rent, you think?"

"Fifteen, twenty bucks," Mal said. "I've got plenty of cash."

"Good, I hadn't thought of it."

***

The road to the campsite turned down a slow hill disguised by ratty oaks and a few houses, garbage in the yards. It neared five, and they needed to set camp soon or unload in the dark. The temperature had risen a few degrees with the afternoon drive south. They crossed the Missouri early, as well as the Osage, and were in the Ozarks by any map. There had been signs to the grounds, but not good ones and it was not camping season. The last house before the gates looked alive—a lit window, a mowed lawn, a plain woman yanking slender, bulbous things in her garden. She looked up at Sam. Her thighs were thick, and there was a mole round as a quarter on the inside of her leg. Sam thought of sticking his tongue out.

The homemade gates to the camp were open, and Mal idled the car in front of the office, a clean building. A wooden sign painted white, *Three dollar nights, firewood two dollars*, barred the closed doorway. There were no lights visible. Another sign above the first read, *Guests check in before camping.* Sam decided he would be useful and exited the car. A fan-belt whirred and Sam skipped away. The air was warmer in the Ozarks, but the wind swelled and Sam's hair was fussed. It would be better protected by trees, the tent, a cave, he thought. There was a sawdust bungalow he had not noticed before to the right and sheltered by the slope of the hill. It was likely the restrooms and showers. He frowned, thinking of spiders biting his genitalia. He knocked on the office door. It was shameful wood and distributed energy disappointingly. There was no answer and no sign of recent occupancy. He returned to the car.

"Guess we should set camp before dark."

"Sure," Mal replied, "what'll you do to pay them?"

"We'll pay when we leave. They'll understand. Maybe I'll come back before it's too dark to see if anyone's home."

The road was dirt, unlike the concrete roads from Sam's camping youth. They had always camped at parks, places with trails and deputy forest rangers who gave natural amphitheater slide-shows about raccoons and squirrels and possums every third weekend in May and June and July and August and September. There had always been rows of tents and you had to come early or you might get stuck next to an RV and hear their AC all night or their TV's laugh-track, especially after the parks

got electricity in those flip-front boxes and the prices went up a dollar a day. That almost never happened to Sam's father, who went out on Wednesdays to find sweet spots near the lakes, nestled out of sight of the RVers. He turned on the portable black and white only if there was a game Sam wanted to watch. There were no RVs today and no tents either.

Sam pointed to a break in the dirt road. It became leaves and sticks, but they backed up carefully. They were in woodland, the sky open like sweater holes. The car bumped over roots, snapping them if they gave. They chose the fourth of four unoccupied spots, the tent square overlooking a creek, the one they would canoe tomorrow or the next day. The sun fast faded behind the western tree-bank. Their fire-pit overflowed with soot and pale ash. Sam kicked at it, making room for fresh wood. It burst, a gray grave, wispies in the air, a smell like earthy cumin. While Mal unloaded, Sam decided to collect wood now, even start a fire, or he wouldn't be able to find kindling in the dark.

"I'm gonna gather what firewood I can."

"Okay, but I don't know how to set up this tent."

"No, you wouldn't. I'd rather do that in the dark than walk around all doubled over. Just leave it."

"Fine," she said, continuing to unfold the clanking poles, the chalky plastic pegs.

Sam cased the site. He found plenty of nubbed twigs and spotted vines but nothing long-burning. He pushed into the other sites, hoping to find bigger wood in

their pits. He almost clapped his hands upon discovering a large hunk in a neighbor plot. Only, it was still warm, little reds wormed on one end, the other okay to touch. Sam looked around, afraid he was stealing. On the site's picnic bench, hidden from the dirt road by an obtuse angle was a black pot, the lid removed. It was a soup. There were pinto beans and sliced celeries and perhaps chickens or rabbits or squirrels or persons. It steamed, smelled of garlic salt. A raised word in the body, the brand name, read *Stew-it!* Sam peered around again, guessing he might see the campers returning from the latrine. There was no one after moments, and Sam frowned. Where was Burt Reynolds and his bow? Jon Voight and his daughter? He stole the wood block, gripping and pinning the cool end with his hands and wrists, and returned the thirty feet to his own pit.

"Did you see that pot? There's food still warm in it."

"Where?"

Sam pointed.

"How odd," Mal said. "Think someone just left it?"

"I don't know." Sam remembered the peculiar campground strangers—the thin girl-child without breasts but plenty of nipples who fled him after an hour's play at Lake Silvia because he suggested she have a birthmark removed, the fat men with their balloon hands and missing joints marching their towels to the showers in their high shorts, the unshaven forest ranger, breath smelling of butter, pushing him along home with a pat on the butt, the old man missing four fingers and four teeth—Sam somehow mistaking him from the back for his father and being scared suddenly when

the cripple turned, Sam thinking his father had badly lost a fight—the open showers with the daddy longlegs, spiderish and menacing, the bullfrogs homosexual at night, the shapeless nighttime fear, the bear snuffling, and he was never sure if he'd heard one or an armadillo since they were equally loud and brazen, but he thought so and would swear on it if he had to because he felt it behind his neck.

"Did you steal that log?" Mal pulled and stomped at the flaccid tent. She knocked the metal poles loudly.

"Nope."

Sam made the fire, careful as best he knew with the lighter-fluid. Sam dangled then dropped the match. The fire coughed alive, a good thing since it was already dark. New shadows fell back from the picnic table, the backed car, Sam's legs. Mallory hovered on the margins of the light, stomping around the impossible tent, plugging poles into each other. Sam poked at the fire, irritating it.

"Having trouble?" he asked over his shoulder.

The little reds sexed, multiplied into oranges and blues, best of all. They should have the tent up soon.

"At least you're good for making fires."

Sam stood to turn. "You have it all wrong. Pegs in the ground first. Got to be grounded."

***

Sam decided to use the restrooms.

"Can't you just whizzle out here?"

"Yes."

"But you won't?"

"Correct."

"I'm coming."

They zipped the tent. Sam grabbed a roll of two-ply in case he had to wipe any part of himself. He fingered the pocketknife in his pocket. It was diminutive and sharp, and Sam mostly used it to clean his fingernails, but he wanted it now all the same. He scanned again the potters' empty site, wondering why they left so quickly. It was completely dark, and so Sam hooked the lantern about his finger, battery powered since he didn't understand kerosene like his father. The lantern was strong and a bit blinding. Sam looked first for the pot, and it was there, cold and congealed now. Almost useless. Perhaps a few straggler insects would find it. It would be best to dump it or hang it for fear of raccoons or bears though it was October. He skirted the pot and left it alone. The new night was cold, in the fifties. Mal shivered into her coat. Sam's head was warm, and he inhaled deeply through his nose. It was cloudy, Sam could tell, because there were no stars, only polychrome gray and black, and it was windy and smelled like rain.

"You suppose it'll rain?"

Sam didn't answer. He was thinking of doing things to Mal, either in the safety of the restroom or back in the tent. Her chest only just made dents in her jacket. He had had a dream once, when he was much younger, that he had a bound and ready, small, toned black boy (he was but a boy himself then and so it was alright) in

his bed. How there was room for the both of them wasn't apparent, and Sam wasn't clear about exactly how things were positioned. He had dreamed he licked the boy's neck below the ear and that's when he ejaculated. He had had many dreams since then. Mal looked nothing like a small black child. Suddenly and for a passing moment, he cared nothing for her at all.

They reached the sawdust bungalow, the Men's side, and Mal was in before him, leaping over the open, tiled threshold. The restroom was warm, out of the wind. It smelled of talcum, hand soap, industrial paper towels. As soon as he pulled the dangling chain, gray moths humped their heads against the light bulb. Mal's eyebrows were attractive at least. He could see her better in the light. Sam clicked off the lantern, left it against the entryway wall.

"Never been inside one of these," Mal said.

"A learning experience." Sam wandered to a urinal. Adjacent were the showers with happy, hard plastic curtains. He placed the two-ply on his head, balanced. "You plan on listening?"

"I'll look too if you don't mind," but she was inspecting a spider web, the fat creator consoling a squirming thing.

"Look, Ma, no hands." Sam wiggled, his hands high in the air. He was peeing good now. He splashed about.

"Shut up with that fake accent."

"Honey, that's my real voice. The edumacated me is the fake one."

"Not funny." Mal swatted at something behind her ear.

Sam finished, using a piece of tissue to clean. “It’s true. I’m a rootin-tootin backwoods lover, a no-good son-of-a-gun, a mountain man,” Sam said. He turned, exposed, dancing toward her. Mal shrieked.

“Away, away. You monster!” Sam jiggled, advancing, singing what he remembered of the Davy Crockett theme. “You gross bear!” Mal backed into the shower, her face contorting, her eyes upon him as she tried to turn. Sam came on. He was close now, pushing aside the plastic curtain, almost in reach, laughing. She could see it clearly. “You pig!” Her voice rose. Sam grinned. “You monster, monster! Don’t touch me!”

Sam stopped, a foot already into the shower, arms above his head, mid-dance, shrinking. He exhaled a noise, a laugh, a part of the song still lodged in his neck, diminishing. He turned, hid, hunching, fussing with himself. He shuffled and shifted. His back stiffened. He hurried out and away, almost leaving the lantern, not turning it on as Mal called after him.

***

There were two sleeping bags, Mal already into hers, her back to him. Sam undressed in the blackness, listening to her breathing, the insectless October silence, the wind through the high trees. Sam stooped with the tent’s smallness, folding his daytime clothes into a corner pile. He stood again, his feet crinkling the tent’s plastic floor, abominably loud, jarring. Sam strained in the dark, inching toward Mallory, his bare feet kneading over uneven rocks beneath the tent. He crept over his own bed, leaning close, Mal’s exposed neck and white shirt radiant in the darkness. He

crouched over her now, his own hand drawing out, aiming for her neck, shirt, the bra and skin beneath. Fearing, he withdrew a moment, took stock of himself, tasted his breath, felt the muscle strain in his back, his legs. He listened again to Mal's breathing, even hearing the blinking of her eyelids in the dark, her back to him. His hand reached again, pulling toward her. Sam froze as she stirred, readjusted a submerged arm, the better to strike him with, to fend him off. Sam was on a knee now, the plastic crackling near Mal's head. Suddenly, horribly, she turned to him, her eyes big and wet in the pitch.

"Are you coming in or not?" she said, too loud for the close distance.

"Yes, yes. I am, sorry. I didn't know," Sam whispered.

"Well now you do."

Sam slipped into the bed, into a waking dream. All was permissible, and he thought about Tom Sawyer and unburdening himself and speaking honestly for the first time, only even this wasn't the moment, since he was to play virile, even now, since this, too, required courage. Perhaps in a few minutes, perhaps at the end, but this was novel, an important event, and look at this woman and the impossibility of it all, and Sam almost laughed at himself so that when he heard it, her muted chuckle, he almost didn't realize.

"What's the problem, boy?" Mal was smiling, a hand on him. Her eyes were kind, squinty without her contacts. This was all so remarkable and strange. "We having engine problems?" She was more vigorous, aggressive. She tried kissing him, but her breath was oniony and hot, the sleeping bag scratchy and oppressive, her

lotion smell horrible. Her forehead was huge in the darkness, her hair draping his mouth and nose, her chin sharp against his clavicle. Sam's ears seemed clogged and he couldn't swallow, his saliva gathering around his tongue. Her hands were paws upon him, sticky. Sweat or an insect was crawling along his leg. Suddenly, Mal bit the side of his belly.

Sam lurched away, shielding himself.

"This isn't it, isn't it," he mumbled. He was off her, standing, his blood hot, his legs abruptly cold. Her pinkish lipstick had smeared her mouth into an O.

With distance between them she was beautiful again, looking warm and surprised, her nightshirt mussed from his hands. It had been an error the moment before—something about their positioning, the suffocating sleeping bag. He could try again. He shouldn't miss the chance. He would kiss her neck below the ear.

Mal watched him, her eyes hard now, frowning, her arm pinching off his half of the sleeping bag as she sat up. "You think this is how I imagined? You were gross in the bathroom. You left me there without the light. Now…" Her palm was open to him.

"I'm ready now. I'm ready." Sam wet his lips, biting the lower one. He took a step toward her, rumpling the plastic floor.

"Good luck with that, boy," she said, turning away, pushing hair off her forehead, her neck tense, ears purple in the heavy darkness. Her eyes click-clicked in the silence.

"I'm sorry," Sam said, to himself mostly.

After a terrible quiet, Mal spoke again, her voice almost panicked, “Well, are you coming in or not?”

***

In the middle of the night a cow across the creek began to bellow. It kept them awake with its nearness and insistence. The cow sang past midnight and one and into two, when it began to rain and they awoke, their small tent pulsing in the wind. The cow mewled short, halting moans. Mal rolled toward Sam, complained sleepily,

“Can’t you shoot it or something?”

“Shh, try to sleep. We’ll find it and murder it in the morning.” Soon the cow could barely be heard over the rain, and Mal slept, her back to him in the chaste sleeping bag. Sam was awake and listening. An owl away and to the right, the cow quieting, a dog or coyote somewhere. Nature things. The tarmac tent’s floor was rippled and thin, scattered rocks below. If he thought about it he could almost smell his father’s coffee, powdered milk, the cigarettes just out of the light.

Sam noticed a small beading of water from the near corner. It ran along the perimeter of the tent, pooled, and shot toward him. It was a leak. They didn’t have cots, which had saved him as a boy when the water had risen in the tent, when four days it sat stagnant in the corners and was there when they packed and again the next summer when they hauled the tent out of the humid basement. Sam sat up and spied another line sneaking in a second corner. He reached for his towel, the one he had used as a mitt to hold their spaghetti dinner. He puffed it against the tent’s wall, only his weight sent the beads bumbling towards Mallory’s head, asleep and frowning

against her pillow. Sam smashed them with his fist, wiping the water back, the towel making the sound of a zipper against the tent floor. He should have borrowed a tarp and strung it at an angle over the tent as his father had done. A drip fell through the ceiling. And another. The early leaks sped, and Sam hurried for his dirty clothes to erect a levee, to dike against the water. He yanked them and lunged over Mallory, where small puddles already threatened her open hand. The sprinkle was a storm, and the first thunder, a boom and cackle, woke her.

"No worries, just the storm. We're leaking, but you sleep. I know something about this."

"Thanks for shooting the cow," she garbled, shifted.

An insidious line crept out from under his levee. He grabbed for the shirt but it was soaked. He lifted it and the water eased in, spilling close to Sam's knees. He mopped at it. The tent walls sucked in and out with the wind. Sam worried it might pull their stakes, tumble them into the creek, tadpoles swimming in their drowned mouths. He decided to create a cross wind, open the zipped windows. It was a mistake. A pocket of water had collected and splashed over Sam's bare feet. Teeth clenched, he rezipped the window. He had nothing to soak save his pillow-case and the blanket Mal clutched. Sam snatched for his pillow, ripping off the case, running it along the roof for the leak, hoping. He found nothing to plug, but the stream scuttled inside his shirt, down his arm, his belly, his crotch. He was slippery and ill, as if leeches clung to him. It was thoroughly cold. Again, the water slinked over his small toe. He needed something to bail with, a can like his father used. The spaghetti cans.

Sam unzipped the tent. The whole arrangement whipped at its foundations, waking Mal again. The zippered door flapped, a miserable flag. The night creek was pregnant, quickening, flushing below them, the air weighing with water and cold.

"What in the world are you doing?"

Sam didn't answer. He dashed into the night, his toes painful against the rocks then squishing in the muck, his boxers exposing him again. Horizontal rain slapped his back and shoulders. He could see only by the great cracks of lightning, his glasses wet and crooked. It was an awful lot to expect. He staggered, tripping over himself to the garbage tree where he had hung the cans. He tiptoed. The pine bark was sharp against his wrists as he yanked at the wet rope.

Mal yelled something over the rain. He couldn't understand but screamed back, "It's fine. I've got the cans!" The cow was plaintive and frantic across the angry creek. Where was the *Stew-it!*, a perfect tool for bailing? It was gone, blown off the bench and away. Falling again, trash in hand, his elbows landed first, mud blackening his neck. He crawled to his knees, panting, his lips pushed out big to breathe in the rain. Only now did he recall the first bloody-armed fall from the scarlet bike and his huge father scooping him right back onto the seat, bleeding be damned.

Scuttling, soaked, dragging the spilling trash, Sam reached the tent and found it zipped against him.

"I've got the cans!" he cried. "I've got them!"

Katrina

So I veered off and started the story wrong according to Louis, so what. We had time. It was the beginning of break, the comptroller calling fifteen, the men separate huddling in whatever shade they could find. Few trees made it here in the bottoms. They'd have to cut them up later, or maybe we'd do that next. Things were already sticking in our tar—shoeprints, cigarette butts, a loose insert from the *Picayune*. It would all be paved over anyway. The generators were buzzing somewhere behind our heads and me arguing to Louis and Frank both, "This is just as good."

Louis was only puffy, cheeks and belly, and he wore boots too small for him, said he'd "found them" just floating along, which was plausible. Louis was the shortest and when he was genuinely angry he got quiet, wouldn't look you in the eye. That's when you knew to apologize, but we were still having a good time. Our new friend Frank was even bigger, one of those men without a waist who seemed to belong in this state, who might have actually lived here, before. Sweat gathered along his temples at the hair and upon his stubbly lip.

There was a bitumen barrel for each man, their open tops hot and hazy. They clustered in threes just off the broken road. Normally they'd use the pavers, rollers, sealcoaters, but everything was still hell, the floodwaters up, and we were doing it the old way back before Superpave. They'd probably rip it all up and do it again, but who's complaining.

"It is not! You think you can *codify* me in your stories, like I was scenery, like a stupid tree, unthinking uncaring un un," Louis stammered, proud of *codify* but stuck. I couldn't see beyond his flopping lips, but I knew perching there, somewhere in his head were the same memories I had and was presently attempting to recall for the benefit of our pal, Frank, who had not grown up with us.

Frank did not believe anything important happened to boys, né Crystal City, Texas, or anywhere else, believing instead that all politics and lawsuits and boyhood testimonials were inventions of psychiatrists and the Jews and the ACLU, and I might be willing to entertain the notion, having had trouble with lawyers myself, except I had a story that proved otherwise. I knew the verifiable (since I had a witness) and unassailable (since I could swear on my part of it) truth, which my confused friend Louis was trying to dispute, him believing he owned the better claim on story because he went to State and me to Tech. I had done some reading since and was certain my recollection was sharper. Besides, we were both hauling tar today, the money in New Orleans too rich to pass.

Louis was unreliable, his brain full of wire and grout. That's all he jabbered about, refurbishing ancient bathrooms for the "*huevos*" he called them, in old Houston, the new ghetto, their baby-laden cleavaged women, the Tex-Mex smells and flour and cumin always on hands or lips. But there weren't many Mexicans here in New Orleans, and Louis was in over his head with all this tar.

"It is too just as good. Every time you tell it her breasts get bigger," I said.

Frank bit into a tin-foiled something. The corners of his mouth came away clean. “Breasts?” he muffled.

And me finishing, “And your johnson gets longer.”

“You were talking about breasts. What do I care for his dick?” Frank said. He caught on quick. I liked him for it.

Louis was flustered, his hair black and greasy in the tar heat. “All I’m sayin’ is you can’t forget my part. Last time you left out the whole wood scene. I done been your friend for twenty years and you won’t give me this.” His hands were buried in burlap gloves, shiny tar still smoking at the wrist. He balanced a sandwich on his gloved fingertips, carelessly bringing the tar close to his neck. I’d have warned him, but I didn’t want to. There was some sort of open wound on his elbow, but who’s looking.

“Wood? Dick?” Frank was confused. I thought he had it. It was disappointing. Frank was a fat man. I wanted to like him. I went on,

“That’s because I can’t verify what you did or did not do with that woman in the woods at recess. And I don’t much enjoy repeating the details you’re so kind to reveal. We were twelve. And last time was little Cousin Denny. No way he wouldn’t inform his momma and you’d been hauled before the PTA for corrupting the youth—” and Louis,

“Ha! I was the youth! I’d like it to be known that I did indeed get a handy from that woman in the woods behind the trailers. Touched her breasts, too. Didn’t get to take off the bra, though. Can’t claim that.” His lips pursed. “I guess that means

I been statutory raped." Louis pushed out greasy, short laughs. He was better now, no sign of real hurt. I could go on with it. I had been trying to get the story out for minutes now, but we were all so easily distracted. I said,

"You have been so advised, Frank, that the defendant exercises his right to interject any old random invention he likes into my perfectly truthful story, ibid, ergo, pluribus unum."

Louis peeled his lips from his teeth into a grin. He bit his baloney, the gloves shielding his face below the eyes. There weren't so many bugs back in Houston, something to do with the brackish Pontchartrain water here and the slow pumps and the waste, and at least it wasn't peak summer anymore. I wasn't bothering to eat. What's the sense in eating? The sky was pretty, grey and blue, and maybe it was me, but I couldn't be happier. I admit the tar was making me light-headed. And blinking, Frank said,

"Breasts."

I slapped my forehead. "Right, so the woman was thirty-five, not unattractive—" and Louis again,

"She was a peach, twenty-eight, smooth skin running up her thighs, one of those cute speech impediments where she can't say 'r's, funny thing for a teach, a silver little wedding ring she didn't even bother to remove…" Louis' eyebrows kept jumping up his face, tadpoles against the current. I thought they sped up Chaplin movies, but it was possible if you tried.

"If he's making it up he's got his story down." Frank was impressed. I hated him a little. All I wanted was to tell the story right. My story, which had different themes.

"Right, so she was our teacher. Sixth-grade math, fractions." Running behind our house and out eventually to the Brazos was a drainage ditch, concrete up near Upland Park drive and the richer folks but muddy, creek-like near us. That summer I had caught tadpoles, hundreds because you could just *scoop* them, and I knew better than to bottle them like caterpillars, so I kept them in an aquarium, part cracked but sound enough for tadpoles. I didn't have to feed them but I tried fresh water, algae. Soon I forgot them in favor of dinosaurs or trains or my flame-and-blue pop gun that popped caps. I found the tadpoles later where I had left them. They drowned on themselves, a few pushing around and through the piles. I dumped them in the driveway, maybe one out of ten moving, a fraction. I didn't know what to do with the broken bodies so I bottled them, scooped them up with that same cup that fetched them from the ditch. Ten hundred dead peepers. It had a bit of an effect on me. Felt bad for the helpless things. "A bit of a tyrant—" and Louis again,

"Was not!" and me,

"One of those women who sees perversion in a young girl's forgotten button, a hiked skirt, a scratched mosquito bite on a foreleg or shin. You know the type, likes to make girls cry, fawns over boys." Louis,

"I resent that!" and Frank,

"But it lends credence to your story—boy crazy at twenty-eight. Handy in the woods. You see it on TV all the time, blond-haired teacher likes to talk like a little girl, takes the boys wherever she can get them. I'd believe it. Sixth grade. A little early mechanically, but I'd believe it."

"You shouldn't," I said, "She'd never. The woman was a tyrant—" Louis,

"You didn't know her like I did. Our time in the woods—" me,

"All twenty-eight seconds of it." Louis,

"Hell."

"Who's talking here? I am. You shut up." Why was I suddenly serious? Louis frowned. The tar bubbled in its barrels, waiting, and were we putting it down or cleaning it up? It might be easier to cover everything in it, a tar town, a *Candyland* pit stop.

"The woman was a witch, liked to watch little girls cry, a special level of hell waiting for a teacher like that. There was one girl in particular, a sweet girl—" and Louis,

"You didn't think she was sweet at the time. You twisted her nipple and called her a whore." me,

"Well, I done grown up since then, haven't I? She was a sweet girl, quiet, shy. Just wanted to protect her, even at that age, maybe that's why I did what Louis says I done. We do the opposite of what we mean sometimes, twist a nipple means *hello*, call you a whore means *I like you*, that sort of thing. A sweet girl, red hair—" Louis,

"Brown." me,

"Red hair, freckles, lips the same color as her skin, just faded into her mouth—" and Louis chiming,

"Can't speak to that myself." me,

"—cold little wrists. When I had grabbed her I wanted to yell at her *I love you* but you boys know that age, can't do right, ended up pinching her nipple, shouting *whore*—" Louis,

"That's right. Saw that. Playground an hour before my handy." me,

"She stood there. We all did, ready for the afternoon pledge like always—" and Frank,

"Wait, where?" I wasn't doing well with setting, and Louis,

"Back to the classroom. The scene before the woods and my handy, which we'd better be coming to or this story is a waste of time. We did the pledge of allegiance twice in Texas. 'Fore and after noon. Took up more time. You wouldn't know that, Frank, being a Arkie." me,

"Stood there, terrified eyes. At first I thought she was afraid of me since I watched her, but then I saw the old hag—" Louis,

"Twenty-eight!" me,

"—halting us mid-sentence, a few of the slower kids going on without her, pledging to no one while she stomped up to the girl, grabbing her wrist from where it hid in a dark pocket, maybe its fingers crossed, maybe fondling anything, a toy, a cross, and the hag ripped it out, pinned it against the girl's chest, her heart, over the very nipple I injured. It was like twisting the plastic top of a juicer hanging by a

stubborn plastic thread. Just why the girl had forgotten the hand over the heart I didn't know." Louis,

"Me neither." me,

"But we started up again, Louis holding his chest and me saluting since I was a Cub Scout and we were allowed that, teacher belting out loud. Only she stopped us again, practically ran back to the girl who was crying now, crying and crying like the world was ending. The woman screamed *Under God, Under God* and the girl was losing it. She hadn't been speaking. Hadn't wanted to pledge that moment. I'd seen her say it with us that morning, so it wasn't a religious thing, her wrists a little warmer then, her nipple unbruised, and I wondered if I was responsible—" Many tadpoles had been crushed at the bottom of my aquarium, broken by the weakness of their limbs and the weight of those above. I pushed the tadpoles into the glass jar. I felt sorry for them, but I ground their bodies with a stick to make room for more, to hide the evidence from my parents, who should have been paying attention but were so easily distracted by themselves. I tried not to grind any of the living though I'm sure I did, scooping them, compounding and repeating the cosmic with the specific crime, and somehow this was worse, the commingling of the dead and living until the dead choke us off, and I feel this explains the modern condition in some way, only who are the tadpoles and who is doing the grinding and who put me in the middle of all this dreadful tar? Louis,

"I'd say so. A psychic wound."

Frank frowned at the psychobabble. me,

"Shut up. Maybe the girl was taking a stand, didn't want to pledge before God loyalty to something she didn't understand, what do kids know? Maybe between morning and afternoon a revelation came. *Don't speak the pledge*, says the voice of God. What do we know? Who can understand the motives of a little girl? Not me, nor you, nor Frank, nor any little girl grown up and remembering or any little girl living and attempting to explain any choice she made ten minutes ago. So I intervened. I stood on my desk, climbed it quickly for fear of my nerve. Almost slipped, but I yelled *Stop!*" Louis,

"You did no such thing!" me,

"You, Louis, shut your mouth, so I'm telling what I shoulda done, what we shoulda done! It's better this way." Louis,

"We? Shoulda done? *Codify! Codify!* What about the handy and you getting in trouble for spitting on the girl and the lawsuit and the testimonial and the ACLU, how the story's supposed to go? I ain't about to listen to your horseshit." me,

"Yes, I'm saying what I shoulda done. Yelled. Stomped. Told that teacher off." Frank wasn't listening anymore. He was looking at the sky, grey and blue. It was terrible, still all jumbled from the storms. I took a deep breath. Twenty yards to our left the comptroller was fishing out a dead something, a blackened shrew, from one of the barrels, a look of horror upon his face. I knew what he was thinking. Why would anything get so close to all that tar? And munching his lettuce, Louis,

"So everybody's crying, the spat-upon girl, teach too, and I saddle up beside her, the woman's mascara like wet newsprint. I says to her, 'Shh little lady,

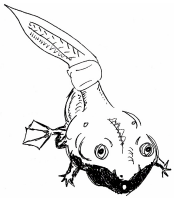
everything's fine,' like I was twenty years *her* senior, like I gave a damn about any of it, and she looked at me then fierce-like, and I thought she was angry to grab my wrist like the nipple girl, rushing us out the trailer classroom but veering off the gravel path to the principal's office, her breathing hot as we pushed through the foliage and me getting an idea, starting to catch on to what was happening when she stopped, wheeled about, leaned over me…" He was talking, but I watched Frank, heat shimmering off the tops of tar barrels.

"I quit. I quit the whole goddamn country." Who said it? Could've been me. The tar was turning me grey, my arms, my face, covered in a kind of soot I hadn't noticed before. And Frank, who'd caught on, who'd been ignoring Louis when I did, said,

"Whatdya say the story was about, the story with the little girl?" and me,

"Injustice, I think." And Louis,

"A handy in the woods. It was great."



Ugran Phusis

A belly first, then a nose-and-lips ripple out from the bath water. His calves and feet glow pink, the heat pruning and nuking his toes. He is a submarine, and there are little Russians running his intestines. His fingers, sticky from sleep, run crescendos across the water, making tiny depressions in the surface tension. He is a car commercial, a Buick, a ball-bearing in mercury. Ears submerged, his breath booms, the waking of a grumpy giant. His cycloptic belly blinks at him. There is no *fun* in this body. He imagines he is a sandbank, hairs river reeds. He is a sea otter, a spoon rest, a peeled avocado. He is a man, in principle, in a bath. What else is he?

As a man, Sam touches his belly, pokes at it. The angry ripples settle. He barely breathes, hardly moves, though he cannot be as still as he would like. Imperceptibly, his pulse flickers the surface water. Particulate grime clings to his arm hairs. The water distorts his legs into obtuse angles. As something prehistoric, some duck-billed water mammal, Sam blinks, his eyes nictitating above the surface. Tiny invertebrate crayfish flee his suddenness. Fogged-shower glass is cyprus grove, and dragonflies the size of shampoo bottles dive-bomb bent-legged water bugs. Hovering somehow in and through the acrylic bath wall, the moon is big and hidden by morning mist. All is quiet save the easy plunk of the dripping faucet and a clicking, ticking clock.

The phone rings in another room. Sam bolts. The water mammal must come to land. He snorts, swallows, gags, vaults himself upright, water lipping the tub in a splash. Crayfish scatter, dragonflies swerve, and the snickering water bugs flit into

the vanishing cyprus roots. As a fleshy, modern, pale man, Sam blinks the hair out of his eyes, claws it off his forehead, rushes for the towel and the incessant phone and itineraries and spread sheets and fast food and everything. The water skaters are sucked utterly down the drain.

Apology Politic

Just blocks away are municipal buildings, street lights, parking lots. Ten minutes deliberate walking. But here the asphalt is uneven, lumpy. There are few and fading dividing lines, drivers passing like slow ships, leering and suspicious, leaving psychic wakes. *Who are you? Why are you here? What are you selling?* Other faces, tired and thoughtful and wary, peer out from behind porches and open windows, politely thinking, *What's this? Who? What are you selling?* Sam's face, lips, and cheeks are pink. He is sure he even sweats weak colors, and his pink nipples chafe against his blue dress shirt, tucked harshly. The blacktop sweeps up, now and then, over the curb, a dark tide over dirt, even into the nasty little twigged bushes clinging to aluminum fences. Spray-painted white across the curb are numbers, addresses that he must read, must match to lists. The figures are often obscured by dollops of wild asphalt, blotting the numbers like loose batter. One, eight… epsilon?

Sam wipes his brow, leaving a gray streak across his cuff. Missed sweat from Sam's hairline drips onto the zoomed, pixilated, photocopied, clipboarded map. It is utterly indecipherable, and Sam cannot place his location. He is on foot in poor Willowfield—heavily poor, black, poor-black, and Democratic. These are his people, the demographic. Sam's shoes are formal, black, and do not fit his high arches. He had been told tennis shoes but chose appearance. His heels rip, his toes scrunch. The clipboard with its map is useless and strains a muscle between his thumb and index, the one unaccustomed to—but used exclusively for—pincing clipboards held at the side as one walks about, perhaps door to door, as Sam is now.

The next house has a silly diamond-patterned fence. It keeps nothing out, not even Sam. One corner of the house is on cinder blocks, and the splintering porch slopes steeply, ridiculously. Sam imagines clowns live here. Very poor clowns. He hinges the gate, shuffles toward the porch, and readies his sentences, his tongue. What explanation could there be for these useless fences, pathetic streets? Perhaps there were funny clownish builders.

Sam doesn't know anything about the local politics. He should have asked the last woman, who *sir*-ed and *young man*-ed him in her apron and offered him tea, though perhaps she wouldn't have answered, there being some reservation on her part. She had turned his questions against him, had demanded he tell her all about himself. He had left befuddled, without the necessary data. And yet he is here to help her, help them.

Sam ascends the porch, pings his knuckle on the metallic screen door. It jangles on its hinges. Sam shifts his weight and the porch eeks beneath him. For a moment he imagines the whole thing might fall, that he might be squished, a pink-and-blue smudge sandwiched between rotting wood. Junk mail overflows a rusting mailbox near the door. A blue flower, a petunia, descends potted and healthy from a wire and ceiling hook, living as if to spite all ground growers. Sam listens for the shuffling feet, the cane, the house dog's whine, the plaintive *Coming!*

Nothing. He does not open the screen or attack the more solid door behind it. Instead, he hobbles off the porch, past the petunia, and back through the gate, his heels scraped to hell, expecting clowns to bubble out the door after him. The sun

throbs overhead and his shoulders glow, taut and chafed beneath his dress shirt. His hair has grown bushy along his neck and the sweat itches terribly. There he is, standing on the sidewalk, looking for all the world like a carpetbagger, like a faker of a Southern accent, though his is mild and genuine, and he is not selling anything, not really.

Grass roots politics, Sam decides, is more like begging.

***

For the first time a man opens the door. He stands behind his screen, arms crossed, eyes narrowing into the afternoon. It is so bright that it might rain, a sudden heating shower. Even the shaded porch seems paled by the amorphous sun, a blob in the western sky. Sam's hair plasters against his forehead, curly and dark. He stabs at it with a finger. One knee, the left one, twinges, a victim of a distracted curb, an earlier sudden stumble. Sam swallows.

"Howdy, I'm with the Democratic Party, out canvassing folks. Anyone in the house like to register or sign-up for an absentee ballot?" Sam runs the last of it together quickly, attempting a smile. *What are you selling?* Sam hears domestic sounds from within the house—the whir of air conditioning, a distant television or radio. Somewhere away to the south a dog barks.

"You sure I'm a Democrat?" the man says, a laugh or sneer on his lips. Sam sees him clearly through the screen door. He is large about the waist, middle-aged, grey-eyebrowed. His cheeks are a lighter coffee than his temples and dark-freckled. They push up his whole face when the man blinks. Fixed on Sam, his eyes flash out

from the doorway shadow. His forehead looks worn, thinned, like someone has wiped the back of a hand across it many times. He appears taller than Sam.

"Not really, no," Sam says, frowning down at his clipboard.

"It's about time your side got out to the neighborhood. There was a pretty little white girl here a couple weeks ago when it was cooler, not that people here would listen. Pretty girl, though. Good talker."

"Yeah?"

"Don't you kids have registration rolls? Wouldn't you know I'm with the other guys? Or maybe you think you can change a man's mind?" His voice is sonorous, bird-like, happy. As he speaks he shifts his weight amiably, his chin falling forward, eyebrows raised. Before Sam can answer, the man pushes open the screen-door, waving Sam in. There are no socks on the man's brown-slippered feet. Despite the weather, he wears a sweater, slacks, and the tip of his belt skips its last loop. Sam wets his lips as he steps into the air-conditioning. The dim hallway smells like paint thinner. "What is this, a summer job for you? You a college kid?" The man's voice is calmer, almost cordial in the close distance. Clear of the screen and in the softer lighting the man seems brighter, lighter, more copper than coffee. He reaches past Sam to shut and lock the door. His arm stinks of eggs, mayonnaise.

"Yessir." Here, Sam sees he is taller by several inches. The man is balding in back, a perfectly circular absence of gray-tipped hair. His skin there is smooth but for a purple mole.

"Major?"

"English."

"Ah, one of *those*." The man brushes past Sam, his shoulders swinging as he trundles down the softwood hallway, a slight limp to his gate. Sam finds himself waddling after the man. It seems like the best way he has ever walked, the best for this floor and this house, and his knee feels fine with this new movement. What luxury. He pushes his toes deeper into his shoes to save his heels.

Coming from the kitchen, a staticky radio voice maligns something or someone shrilly, "—these people are false, fakers, faking their way into our lives!" The hallway feeds into a hazy, green-tiled kitchen. There is a slow-revolving brown ceiling fan and stacked newspapers on the top of a clean refrigerator, clear of pictures or drawings or bills or anything. "It boggles the mind how stupid some people can be. This isn't the 60s!" A photograph of a bus and a blurry face hangs by a pushpin on the far wall. On the brown stove, between gas burners is a copy of *Gulliver's Travels*. Sam smiles at the thought of Gulliver and the Lilliputians, imagines Giant Gulliver here in this room, imagines himself as Gulliver, as adventurer. "Philistines, these people—" Pop! The man kills the radio atop the microwave and speaks over his shoulder.

"Are you supposed to come into our homes?"

Sam thinks in the sudden silence. He had been told many things this morning: electioneering laws, parking instructions, meeting times and places. The chubby white man in charge had seemed kind but slow, his voice monotone, practiced. "I'm not sure."

"You're not." The homeowner bends to retrieve a fallen something, a bottle cap. He does not look at Sam.

"Ah… I can…" Sam turns, stammering, and thumbs at the hallway.

"No, no, I'm just—so don't you have voter-registration records?"

Sam raises the clipboard. The men share it briefly, both squinting at the tiny type.

"I see. There's my name—Reever." The man jabs a finger, punching the clipboard. "But the little 'r' is smudged. You Dems that underfunded that you can't get proper printouts?"

"I don't know. This is day one for me." Sam moves back, just inside the kitchen doorway, pushing his right hand deep into his pocket. The man, Reever, eyes him.

"Day one? How's it been? Like a Coke, some iced tea, water?" Sam checks his lips again. Here comes the slow man's voice at last: *Do not go into homes. Do not accept food or drink. Do not interact personally with the demographic.*

"Water would be great, thanks." Water is hardly *drink*. Sam shifts his weight, shoving the clipboard under his arm. "It's been… terrible so far, I think." The man pauses to look at Sam, then nods, clicks open a cabinet, retrieves a tall, cylindrical glass, and turns to the sink, filling it half-way. Tiny sediments swirl in the glass as Sam takes it. Little bubbles line its walls. It is thick glass, the yellow kind, like amber sap, and it feels like piano ivory in Sam's fingers.

"Sorry, no ice."

Sam nods, blinking.

Reever aims at the kitchen table, wooden with legs curved at the foot like a porcelain bath. “Sit,” he says. Sam sits, picking up and placing his chair carefully so as to avoid scraping the floor or making noise. Sam’s thumb aches as he rests the clipboard on the table. A plastic tablecloth puckers into his wrist and forearm. There is a napkin holder and today’s paper on the table. A chemical spill headline and picture of a spiraling cloud.

“What’s your name, son?” Reever plops into the opposing chair.

“Sam… Reeves.” It is a lie. Why has he lied? What is he selling? “Pretty close to yours. Maybe we’re related.”

“Not likely.” Reever taps a finger on the table.

“It’s possible. We’re all related somehow.”

“Are we? How’s that?” Reever leans back, setting his lips. There is a clock on the wall and the second hand is stuck, bouncing at fourteen. Sam opens his mouth but finds his teeth dry, his lips sticky. He drinks from the glass instead, gulping half the water at once. Over the rim, he can see that the man’s sweater, which had appeared oddly formal, is worn, loose at the neck, and its brown threads have faded to gray. Reever’s clavicle shines out from where an undershirt should be. He wears no watch, and his arms push forth from his sleeves as if he had grown suddenly and urgently while Sam wasn’t looking. “So you’re working for the party or some specific candidate?”

“The party, but this is John Hoops’ district.”

"Yes, I know. Will you be voting for Hoops?"

"I don't live here, but I would if I did."

"I see. Have you met Hoops? Do you know him?" Reever bends forward in his chair, his belly pressing into the table.

Sam fondles his water glass, takes another sip, shakes his head no.

"No?" Reever's hands fidget, a thumb grinding into a palm. "Let me tell you about John Hoops." The dog barks again in the distance. "John Hoops came here just like you—wearing a dress shirt, dress shoes—presented himself at our church, *my* church, spoke all the right words, said *hope*, *faith*, *equality*, *education*—" Reever's eyes grow larger, whole scoops of yogurt with tiny raisin pupils. "—and asked for *loyalty*. The church took a poll, judged him sincere, mostly because the other guy skipped us for the Second Baptist on Eighth, and come November we voted for him—I voted for him despite that 'r' on the roll. He promised to come back, to visit us and update us, to hear our ideas." Reever licks his teeth behind his lips, a predatory scowl across his mouth. "But he hasn't done a goddamn thing for us. We haven't seen him since—just young folks like you every few months, both parties, folks who still buy into that junk. You do, don't you?" Reever's finger pokes the air between them.

Sam begins to shrink, his nose hovering above the amber glass, smelling the water, the city's chemicals. Thinking of the way Reever said "goddamn," he contracts further, hunching toward the table cloth. With Reever's finger jutting out over his head, pointing at someone else, some other Sam in another house, Sam swallows, tries to speak, mumbles,

"Yessir, I believe I do."

"Ah-ha!" Reever spits, slapping the table with an open palm. "Are you coming back? Are *you* coming back?" Particulates scatter in Sam's glass. The air is suddenly still, painfully quiet, but when he looks, Reever's lined forehead smoothes. The old man tips back into his seat. A smile spikes at the corner of his mouth. "Good," the man says, no longer looking at Sam, looking instead somewhere down and in, through his belly and at the little Germans running him. "Good," he repeats.

In the silence Sam stares at the sediments in his glass, tiny, black and orange. The kitchen walls are green, and above the threshold to the hallway is a crocheted "God Bless You and Me" placard in red and white string. The room is small, Sam and Reever filling up nearly half of it themselves, though there is space for several more at the ends of the table. The secondhand of the round wall-clock ticks over to fifteen. One second has passed. This might as well be true, though Sam's objective mind rejects it. Still, things move slowly sometimes. Sam's brain moves slowly and ticks over.

"I won't come back because no one here wants me to. No one talks to me. They talk at me or through me, even the women, the old ladies."

Reever, his finger still poised between them, starts to life once more, the finger falling and standing on the table. "That's because you're not coming back." Reever's grin sinks. His shirt shifts and even more of his neck and chest show. Gray-ended chest hairs flip over the sweater's loose collar.

Sam starts and stops and starts again. "I see. But I could come back."

"You won't."

"I could."

"You won't."

***

Reever's knife pricks the air, enunciating his words. "My wife would never have let him come and go like this. I have an idea what he's doing, but I work nights." The natural light has waned in the kitchen, but a tiny uncovered bulb over the brown stove illuminates their work. Reever's onions are sweating nicely. Sam has the little paring knife and is coring and dicing tomatoes. He works at it, carefully assaulting the skin. The knife is dull, and the tomato bends and flops. The gas stove, its starting match blackening in a spoon rest, fogs the already dim room, sending volleys of unfolding smoke towards the low ceiling, the slow fan. "At least he's still in school. That's something." The men are divided by the stove, and Sam sees sweat on Reever's face—little gray drops along his eyebrows, wiry and black like steel wool. His cheeks jostle happily with the exertion. The onions crackle in the butter, the ancient pan glowing orange at the bottom. Sam worries briefly that the pan will melt, explode somehow, embedding onion into Reever's forehead, face. This is a strange thought, Sam thinks.

Salt and grime have accumulated under Sam's eyes and his hair is soaked. He rakes at it with his free hand, tomato juice clinging to his temple. He has rolled his sleeves and removed his shoes, but the air-conditioning is silent. Perhaps it is expensive to run. The stove irradiates the room.

Reever plops ground beef into the onions, sputtering, splattering. A loose sweater thread dangles dangerously close to the flame. “She’s not dead, just gone somewhere. All the note said was ‘Sorry.’” Reever moves back to his station. His knife punches through a bell pepper, aged and mushy. Sam has the green onions, their white bulbs turned pale, tiny tendrils growing. The overhead fan tilts as it peters, too slow.

Suddenly, Sam feels a current on his neck. He squints through the smoke over his shoulder. A figure fills the doorway. It has a young face, but it twists, winces seeing Sam. The boy’s hair is pulled neatly, tight, straightened. His collar is new and his neck thin. His skin is lighter than his father’s, more toffee than copper. The stove light, the only light in the room, glares off his forearms, making blue streaks out of the gloomy hallway. It’s only a boy, yet there is something about how still he stands, as if he is sneaking, creeping into the room. Reever has not noticed. Sam holds the dull paring knife absently, level, out in front of himself.

“Boo,” the boy-figure barks from the doorway. “Who’s the ghost?”

Reever does not turn but chirps into the ceiling, “This is our guest, Sam Reeves.”

“Reeves? You our long lost white cousin?” The boy floats into the room, sidling toward the table.

“No,” Reever grunts before Sam can answer.

“You own us back in the day?”

"No," Reever says, more calmly than before. "Sam, this is my son, Malcolm." Sam nods.

"So he's here?"

"He's here," Reever says, turning finally to eye his son. The boy is slim, tall, angular. His ears spread wide with his hair stretched back. His shoes sweep up his ankles and look too large for him. He wears jean-shorts and his knees are bony, ashen. The boy eases his left hand from a back pocket and thumbs the paper on the table, glancing up at Sam. Sam's eyes fall to his knife. Why is he holding it this way, out from his stomach? Why had the boy reached for his pocket?

"Does he speak?"

"I do. Nice to meet you."

"Sure," says the boy, the 'sh' whistling against his teeth. The boy's eyes fall to Sam's clipboard. Reever stirs the pan, turning down the blue flame. The popping butter slows.

"Almost done," says Reever. "Set the table, Malcolm."

Without responding, the boy slips closer to Sam, stands near him, waiting. "Move, please." The boy gestures behind Sam, a drawer he's blocking. Sam leaps aside and the boy fishes out silverware, pushing the drawer shut with a hip.

"Three," Reever says, not even looking.

The boy slinks back to the drawer, pushing past Sam once more and pulling out another dull-looking fork and knife. "Or don't you need one?" the boy asks, glaring at Sam's hand. He still clutches the paring knife out from his stomach and has

turned to face the boy as he moves. Sam drops it quickly onto the counter, watches it clatter.

Reever, grasping the steaming pan by a holey cloth, looks fully at Sam. "Don't pay him mind. Come, sit."

The boy places paper napkins and plates on the table, moving Sam's glass to the head seat, taking Sam's old spot for his own. Reever spoons the hamburger mixture onto the plates, squeezes ketchup onto his own. Sam waits but sees Reever is insistent that Sam sit. Sam eases into the chair. The boy, Malcolm, begins to eat, dipping a piece of bread into his ketchup, red lining the outside of his mouth.

"Malcolm, we have a guest. Say grace, please." The boy halts mid-chew, swallows twice. Sam lowers his eyes but does not close them. The boy stares straight at Sam as he speaks, an earnest scowl showing a missing tooth, distended pink gums.

"Jesus, please help this white boy make it to his ride tonight—"

"Malcolm!" Reever says, slapping the table. For a moment, there is calm. The ceiling fan lilts to and fro in its slow revolution, a jaunty dance.

"—and let this ghost live to see tomorrow—"

"Enough!" Reever's face twists, a walnut crease sliding onto his cheeks. The second hand on the clock bounces at sixteen. Two seconds have passed in four hours, but this is of course ridiculous.

"—somewhere where he belongs—"

"Mr. Reever, I—" Sam starts.

"—and don't forget to bring Momma back, so I'm not alone with him—" Malcolm sticks his dinner knife at Reever. "You bastard. Amen."

Sharp silence blankets the room once more. Sam fidgets with his fork, scooping and rescooping the ground beef. Malcolm scarfs his, busily ignoring his father's red face, his eyes' quick blinking. *Do not enter homes. Do not engage personally with the demographic.*

Sam stands. "Mr. Reever, I'm sorry to have put you to the trouble. I should go. Here—" Sam reaches for his wallet. "Let me pay you for the food."

"Pay? The food?" Reever says, face suddenly undone and eyebrows up. "No, no. Not money. Don't—" It is as if Sam has said something worse.

"I'll take your money," says Malcolm, reaching, clawing at Sam's arm. "What are you selling anyway? Why are you in my home?" Several bills spill from Sam's wallet onto the red-soaked paper plate. Whatever they are, they are too small. "Run away, Ghost. Go haunt that Toyota." The boy snatches at the loose bills though they have been dirtied by the food. Sam flees the table, stumbling into the hallway to rescue his shoes. The last he sees, Reever is slumped in his chair, pulling the back of his hand across his forehead over and over.

Ripping open the front door, Sam shouts meekly back into the house, "I shall return at some more practicable time." The evening air is cool, and Sam gasps and gasps, the softwood door shut tight behind him, clap-clap. He has left his clipboard but is glad to be free of it. Clutching his dress shoes to his chest, Sam launches into the night.

***

The asphalt ocean seems purple in the twilight haze. It is cooler, yet the street surface, as testament to the sweaty day, is still warm to Sam's shoeless feet. Sam's slick socks stretch and cling to subtle cracks, debris on the blacktop. He will not stop to don the biting shoes, their toothy heels. It cannot be far, and he is not really lost when any straight line intersects a larger, more familiar street. Sam walks the middle of the road to avoid broken gutter glass, surprises. There are no cars to dodge. All decent and free people are locked safe in their homes. Dickensian windows glow, blinded, shielding working families from Sam and other night creatures. If Sam is a ghost, he is a frightened one, conscious of every noise, every shadow. This is no place to be after dark. White skin beams out from the gloom, and everyone and anyone will know Sam is here. There are no working streetlamps. Sam makes his way with the glow of the long-set sun off of rooftops, shimmering haloes out of the west.

Suddenly, rising up out of obscurity is a familiar corner, and in the distance is a white blotch, his parked car, huddled neatly against a curb. Sam quickens, almost skipping, flat-footed, careful not to trip, to fall into the asphalt ocean, to be dragged down by predatory water creatures, mammals even. Sam is a water skater, flitting across the inlet sea. There are no cyprus roots, no trees even in poor Willowfield, but the water skater skims the surface, against the current, pushing his way home. Near his car at last, Sam fondles his keys in his pocket. A June breeze tingles his spine, his dress shirt so thin and weak. Sam looks all around him, a final inventory—the dim houses, shut tight and quiet, bars over windows like eye-lashes, sleepy, blind to him.

Shoes hugged to his chest, Sam bends to open the door. There, scratched brutally into the paint, is a message.

Don't ever come back, Spook.

The Celebration

It was autumn 1207, the second year of the Mongol Dynasty, two years before Chinggis Khan, then known as Temujin, first captured Tangut territory and all of Western Xia, twenty before the rebellion and complete destruction of Ningxia. Soon, the citadel at Wo-luo-hai-cheng would be sacked, the city slaughtered. Soon, Tangut Emperor Lee Anchuan would submit, giving over his daughter, Chaka. Soon, Temujin would see stars in the sky as a sign of his destiny, but these things had not yet come to pass in Etsina Valley.

It was a gasping boom, as if the tired sky had finally split, thin morning cloud unable to blanket the blue. The sound spilled over the barleyed hills to the north from the direction of the steppe. It lipped our pointed pike row, whose tallow logs had been bent, stacked, chopped by me—ghostly me, me as a sleeping waker. But the sound overran our dark-earth battlement. Half the men looked dead already, shoulders up, chins low, sinking into themselves. Perhaps it is best, I thought, for you can never truly vanquish the dead, not with ten thousand thousand men. Not even the Yee Bei, the northern barbarians who fight in silence, can defeat a single dead man, no matter how many they make. The dead and sleeping are many times the stronger.

"There it is, Bei Xin mu, at last." Lu's cheeks and lips were strained from the long night watch, his temples ashen from the lookout fires. We had no gurs, the felt tents our Dangxiang councilors huddle in to the south, and the night had been cold. We had eaten only iron-hard milk curds, sun-dried by our women. There were sheep in the supply line, reserved for peace or victory or as a bribe for Temujin, so the sound of the drums meant disappointment for heart and stomach alike. Lu wet his mouth upon the back of his hand.

The thud came again, shaking us, echoing off the brown-barley hillsides. The kettle drum, or many, many drums struck together—for how could it be just one!—

was hidden somewhere distant. The concussion blurred my eyes, as happens when you stand suddenly after a long repose.

Everything was masked—the morning sun by low-lying cloud, our enemy's position, our own feet by our forward focus. Smoke rose from beyond the hills in churning white sheets. But for the sound, our watch would have continued in shifts. In an hour, our morning torches would have been snuffed. There would have been brief breakfast and time for a hundred sleepy things—a second ditch before the pikes, a visit from our councilors, a reading of signs from our ancestors. But now the watch-fires beyond the pike row trembled with the drums, throwing red whips into the sky.

"This is maddening," whispered Lu, his belly pressed against the piled loess, his chin lifted, eyes reaching out beyond the smoke beyond the hills. "Their music has no *life* to it." Lu grinned at me, his lips lean and blue, teeth pale red from the betel nut. He had been a good friend to sleeper-me in these last days. I would cheer him.

"And how are we to court them? All the women veil themselves behind the hills," I said. A few barked laughs came from the men beyond Lu, overhearing. Soon they hushed, listening to the drums' same slow rhythm. *Throom-chee*, one, two, three. *Throom-chee*, one, two. It was as if Lu had not heard me, his face fallen. The betel hung on his lip. His eyes turned inward, tumbled about in their sockets. Perhaps he was really asleep. Perhaps he had fallen asleep just now. It was a horrible time to be awake.

There were thousands of us, ten thousand maybe, a relief army pressed into service and against this position. In our group were the sixty from our village, a man

for each arrow the Yee Bei horseman carried. I looked for Ji niu's father, but he was not tall enough, hiding beneath the shoulders of other men. We had seen the shoed soldiers from Wo-luo-hai-cheng march and sing together, but we were ten times their number. If they were with us in the line and where, I could not say. We had no Tangut councilor among us, the men choosing the oldest to speak strategy with Anchaun's men. That was three days ago. They had disappeared over the hills to the south, and we were alone. These were ill omens, not worth dwelling upon. I thought instead of myself, and it was easy to sleep again.

***

It was early autumn, and Ji niu worked her garden. Even from distance I could tell her feet were muddied, buried to the ankle. She was a blue smudge against the brown loess of her home, its tan thatched roof, the fading green of her garden stems. I crept toward her along the worn camel path. I hadn't meant to—for I was honorable. Simply found myself bent, a rising mirth on my breath. I had gathered wolfberry, matrimony vine, a fistful bunched to my chest. I hoped to see her face redden, warm, to hear her tiny, happy squeak. As I neared, climbing the bank to her yard, I found her whispering and repeating a work song, simple and slow:

> "Bend, bend, we all bend,
> we all stoop to bend,
> ingredients to gather,
> for our soup to blend."

Azure cloth caught about her waist and split her from behind, tapering mid-calf. Hidden softness sang to me, and the cool breeze that flapped her hair against her pale neck did nothing to ease my breathing, hot upon my chin and chest. I had been

thinking of this for weeks. Her arms and legs, distinct now from her dress, bloomed before the loess walls, her home's adobe mud, and from my new angle glowed apricot against the gray, distant sky. I began to call to her, to warn her of my creeping, but my mouth garbled, choked by the giddiness in my throat.

I had almost reached her, almost smelled her pale smell, turmeric and lye, when a fell breeze revealed her bent face to me—flat and full of blood, clenched, watered, tortured by some mystery grief! It did not chirp the happy song but mouthed and aped the rhyme, her lips quivering around "stoop." Wretchings, convulsions shook her. My eyes darted guiltily to her bare, splotched ankles. Sobering, I stood, announced myself.

"Bei Xin mu greets you."

She whipped herself up and around, her blue dress wrinkled in the front, brief terror across bleary eyes. Her arms pressed against her as if she wore nothing at all. A blade of her black hair stuck to her lip.

"I have hurt myself upon a rock," she said, hiding her eyes.

"Of course, as you say." Next I would ask after her family, the success of her father's crop. It was improper to speak long with her, but it would be easier with her father if she cared for me, argued privately in my favor. I did not have wealth to force the matter.

Her hands fisted at her side.

"I hope I am not the cause of your injury. I did not scare you just now?"

"No, it was the rock," she said, casting about for a suitable culprit. "That one there."

"Shall I punish it for you?" I stepped towards her over the offending rock, the boundary to her modest garden, over the peas, withering with the season. I sank to the ankle in the black soil. In the close distance she was smaller, a head under me, and her hair wisped, wild strands glowing and blowing. She was two years my senior, had played with my sister, had pushed me down one day when I was a child, had laughed and scampered away, my sister's tongue pink and wet and thrust out as they fled to who knows where, to girl places, girl secrets. Ji niu had been beautiful then, powerful. Things had changed, though I could still feel my sister's allegiance about her, enveloping her, an heirloom of simpler times. How I had longed for her to shove my sister, to punish her, to run off with me into secret spots.

"Ji niu, I brought it." I pushed my arm out towards her, unwound my fingers, which had bent themselves around the wolfberry stems, had crushed them by mistake. I noticed then the depravity of my gift.

She did not reach for them, had not seen them even, her features twisting, new tears leaking onto her nose and lips. For a moment she froze, a vision out of a fever dream, her hair like snakes in the wind, her eyes half-closed, turned inward, her hand to her mouth. She was beautiful.

She fled from me then, wailing, leaping around the brown corner and into her father's house. I dared not follow for fear the man would assault me. Had she seen the

ruined Matrimony Vine after all? I would return tomorrow with a proper gift. I must earn her father's blessing by my humbleness and adherence to custom.

***

Throom-chee, one, two, three. *Throom-chee*, one, two. *Throom-chee!*

The drums intensified, a terrible controlled thunder. They were horseback. They could rush over the hills in minutes, but they lingered, no doubt gathering themselves into a frenzy. The man to my left, an arat, a herder from the village outskirts I had seen only a month ago haggling happily at market, scratched his name into the embankment with the edge of his pike. He was careful with the steel blade but his characters still looked done by a child. To his left a man with a tipped hat wrapped his hands in cloth torn from his leg to prevent blistering against the pike. I had been gripping my own for hours without noticing. For something to do, a few men smothered the watch fires, releasing acrid smoke to blind and confuse the enemy's horses, but the wind pushed it back against us, the oldest men coughing. Lu chewed his betel, pike resting against his side.

"At least the sheep will live another day," I whispered, grinning grimly. "Some good comes from no breakfast."

Lu shook his head without looking to me. "No Xin mu. They kill everything, waste everything. Birds, dogs—anything. Even the camels at Li-ji-li-zei and Luo-si-cheng. The sheep will miss their own breakfast."

"Unless we live," I chuckled.

"Yes, of course, as you say."

***

I found her again in her garden. Again the weather was gray. This time I cradled the wolfberry, careful not to buckle the stems or flake off their fruit, separating them between my fingers. I restricted myself to only a polite greeting, a giving of the vine to show my intentions. Then I would find her father in his fields, help with his work, prove myself to him. All was quiet save the wind through the drooping lychees and the warbles of a pheasant somewhere over a shoulder.

"Ji niu," I sang as I plodded, my feet stiff with blood from stooping to gather more wolfberry. A loose piece of grass stuck to my shin, tickling and itching me. "Ji niu, Ji niu, Ji niu," I lilted. Her dress was green today, dim and faded as all things lovely. She stood as if waiting for me, hands clasped before her. Her hair was tied, secured severely against the wind, and her face was stern, cool, her cheeks pale. "Ji niu, Ji niu," I called, as was customary, six times more in my head and on into forever.

"Bei Xin mu," she said, a hand raised against my approach. I was a man's length away from her. I could fall forward to her toes. She scanned my bare feet, thin legs, thin arms and neck, thin hair, thin voice. "You will leave. You are mistaken. There is no one here for you today." It was as if my sister had slapped my hand as I reached for one of her fried cakes, as if I had been struck by finger and nail.

"Ji niu," I said, and the name had changed, as if this Ji niu were not the same, not Ji niu at all. The words from my mouth were separate from the ones that even now chimed against the corners of my mind in a kind of song, a happy but fading

rhyme. Somewhere, a tiny egg had tipped and splattered against the backs of my eyes, coloring the world yellow. The sky was golden-gray, dour, and I felt shame seep into my mouth. “What’s the matter?” I was already retreating, stumbling backwards, the sound of failure like a concussion from a drum.

“You do not know me. You cannot.” Her voice timmered with something like panic. She took a step toward me. “You shall not.” Another step and she was across the rocks which marked her garden into the wild mud, my mud where my footprints puckered. For a moment, our prints melded, hers smashing mine into nothingness. This behavior was bewildering. I had never known her to anger. Her face narrowed. “You are not him. Look at your arms, your hands. Just look!”

“What of my hands?” I managed, a heroic defense. I had never been braver. I held my hands in front of me. They seemed distant objects, small. My left clutched the wolfberries, jumbled and ruined again! I wished to chop my hands off at the wrists.

“They are… they are… claws!” she cried. Several of her hairs had escaped their bundle. They noodled and flopped on her forehead, tried to escape her boiling brains.

I flung my present at her feet and fled, scuttled away, falling once, tumbling as I did that day she first laid hands on me, forced me down, stood above me, showed me the underside of her chin, the twin holes of her nose, the smooth of her forearm, the pale of her ankles. Her father be damned, I must make her love me. My hands worked as I ran, pinching before me like the mocking beaks of crows.

***

The smoke from our fires and theirs behind the hills covered half the morning sky. It glowed brilliant white in thick brush strokes and did battle with the sun to the east. Hours had passed and the men had grown bored—at least, as bored as men can be hearing the sound of approaching disaster. How long would the Yee Bei beat their drums? Had they been known to do this before? We all leaned against the battlement, but some whispered to each other, laughed even. A few down the line had pushed away, made a new, small fire, were sitting and chewing the dried curd but not swallowing, their eyes elsewhere, their ears open and yet closed. To my right Lu had calmed, his eyes only blinking now with each repercussion.

I asked, "Are you thinking of home, of pretty women?" *Throom-chee.*

Lu spoke quietly, not a whisper but a low, soft hum. "I'm thinking of my mother," *throom*, "my sister."

"Pretty women then. I will sleep with them both if you die," I said.

"Pretty women," he said, nodding, his face flat and mouth low. He started and chuckled. "Besides, you will die first."

"Why is that?" *Throom.*

"They will get you while you sleep, and you sleep much easier than me. See how long they wait, making music? You and I will both be dozing before long. Perhaps you are dreaming now. Suppose we're dead already."

"If I have to be a ghost to sleep with your sister, run me through."

"I just might," Lu said, showing his scarlet teeth, the betel nut suspended between them.

A crow landed just before us, upon the point of our pike row, pecked at itself. *Throom-chee.*

"Look," said Lu, gesturing.

My hands clawed at the loose loess, dirt pushing under my nails. It seemed the drums were louder or faster or nearer.

***

What nerve propelled me forward? What wheel tumbled me along, angled me toward Ji niu's house, her garden, for a third time? I had no hope for success, for a glowing, tearful apology, embrace. We had never been close, and I did not know her, not really. I was deluded, but once more I crept toward her garden, sneaking low along the path now in case she saw me, screamed, dashed for her father. What did I hope for? To break myself upon her, to snap myself off at the hilt, to die.

I had no gift and my hands worked against my knees as I bent, forced my way through the untamed earth that divided the path from her home. As I brushed past a mulberry shrub, her home revealed itself, its brick dug from the hillside, brown walls against the gray sky. There was her black-mud garden, rocked off from the wild muds and grasses of the arable land.

She was missing, inside perhaps. I walked freely now, thinking once more of the previous days, my failures. I was at the edge of her garden, and I cast about for signs of her or her father. Nothing. I thought for a moment, then plunged a foot into

her garden. There was a terrible thud. My toe had stubbed itself against a rock. I lifted the foot and shoved it deeper into the black mud, hoping for relief. Instead, it met tangled resistance, tuberous roots of some out-of-season crop. Hurrying as tears broke upon my face, I threw myself into her garden. I landed roughly, smashing invisible stems, breaking plants beneath the ground beneath my crow-claw hands. Her mud was neither warm nor cool. It felt only like mud, like the mud I was used to. It was no special mud, nothing different than the mud I had been shoved into, pushed, crushed into all those years ago. I was angry, disappointed, and so I murdered her future crop, the snow peas, the millet, wrecked anything green. I was a criminal.

Suddenly there was movement back beyond my head, movement in peripheral vision. I turned, looking, guilty black clinging to my cheek and brow. Ji niu had emerged from behind her home, had somehow not seen me, her eyes closed to the world as she marched out away from our mud into her father's field. Shame popped along my head and in my stomach as I thought of her seeing me, and yet I was not ready to give in, to flee a third time. I waited, prone, until her hair shielded her eyes, and then I rose, resumed my creeping. There was no place to hide in the field, should she turn, scream, call me a demon, and I no doubt looked like one, caked in her ruined garden.

I followed the red blur of her dress, the black orb of her head, mud falling from me in chunks like the breaking of a half-kilned pot. She almost ran, her dress catching and tearing on branches at the edge of her father's field. It was as if she had seen me, but her head had never spun, the black wall of her hair veiling her from me.

She took us through the tallow forest, through the ginger, jade, and crimson leaves, away from my own home, off toward wilderness, toward uncultivated land. I huffed to keep up, flashes of flapping red driving me. Twigs and vines snapped under my heel and I froze at the noise, but she persisted, weaving between the trees with her open palms as through river reeds, ignoring the branches biting at her dress. I could not move so swiftly, and so I labored, vines grabbing my feet, undergrowth swatting my head. Sagebrush lizards scurried from the tallow trunks as we rushed forward. Twice I almost lost her, but I'd blink and she'd be a red blotch between russet columns, tangled green.

Abruptly, we were there, a tiny cleared circle where no trees grew, the grasses knee-high. There was a rock pile central, man-made. I had to slow, to return to creeping, lest I run headlong into the clearing, and my feet refused at first, stumbling. She had taken me to a secret place. No path I could discern led here, but it was different than I had imagined. I had thought she would go where she took my sister—to a cave, some opening out of the earth. I had thought for a moment fate would oblige me, but it was only a pile of rocks among the weeds, a foot high.

"Hello, love," she said aloud, softly, as if to herself.

Who? Who? I thought. Was some suitor hidden? Could she mean me? I started to rise from my crouch, but she was silent again, moving toward the rock pile. Her dress was ragged, but I was already a criminal and did not avert my eyes. I wondered if anyone would hear her, would come to rescue her from me.

From my angle it seemed her face was burning, her cheeks flushed from the forest exertion, a hand cupping and blistering upon her forehead. Her hair flapped about though the wind was thin here in our forest, the tallow trees still dressed with autumn leaves.

My pulse slowing and eyes focusing, it became clear that this was a grave and that Ji niu had not meant me or some mirror me the moment before.

But who? When?

Nearing the heart of the glade, she bowed ornately in the direction of the pile, hopping up onto her pale toes, keeping decorum for a heartbeat. Then she fell at the rocks, on her knees, grieving openly again, as I had first found her, pained by a rock. Was she mad? I knew of no one, no boy in our village, no rival to die before I could kill him. She was mumbling, her arms clutching at the grasses by her side. It had been the same for my mother at my father's ceremony and again for my sister.

But it is just rocks, I thought, moving imperceptibly toward her, leaning out into her glade, my hands clawing the air between us. For her to grieve so honestly over the dead reminded me of myself, my lack of respect, and I was shamed anew by Ji niu's example. To show myself would offend all the dead boy's ancestors, even my own. No, I had not lost all sense of propriety, and I did not intrude upon her grief, pulling back from the clearing edge, watching her from tangled safety.

I would seem a mud demon to her to show myself, a devil out of her madness. She was mad, now kissing one of the rocks. There was a noise in her throat—a mangled, chirping, celebratory wail. She was broken—a fanatic, a defender of some

long-dead memory—and I loved her still more. I had long thought of her as a mean, teasing child. She was the same today in body—her still-heaving chest, her terror brow, her spoiled-milk eyes, her legs no longer hidden beneath her pale red dress—but she was a stranger in mind. Now she must think nothing of me at all.

I slid my back against a tallow trunk where she could not see. She kept making that horrid wail, and I listened to it as a kind of punishment. She went on for an hour, maybe more, until all at once the wailing stopped. I scrambled to look. She was gone, the rock pile abandoned. Carefully I stepped into the clearing, half-expecting her to fly at me from the thick foliage. Little could be seen from within the glade, and I hesitated, thinking again of a mirror me, a rival hiding in the far edges of the dell. Finally, still shedding garden earth, I leaned over the foot-high pile.

At my feet was a long, flat stone, among others, characters scratched into its surface, a name. *Lim Mao su*. I had never heard the name before. It was incomprehensible. I bent, but the name did not change, did not shift into one more recognizable, into any of those I knew taken by the plague or dead in last year's summer fire. I rolled the name over and over in my mind, saying it and by the saying hoping to divine its face, its facts. Soon my head began to swoon, some of Ji niu's madness or the madness of the glade overwhelming me. I lay down, my muddied head adjacent Lim Mao su's rock. I thought in my confusion that I could feel the dead boy moving around beneath me, angry that I intruded upon him. I could not leave my back to him if I was to fight, wrestle him down to learn how he had won her. I would join him below if I could. I would die here, face-down, and when she discovered my

body I would mingle with Lim Mao su in her memory. Perhaps in time she would build my own rock pile. Perhaps one day my name would choke the throat of her next lover.

As I slept I dreamed we were children again, Ji niu standing over me. Her nostrils were deep black, and her hair splayed beautifully against the tree-clouded sky. Somewhere off to the right would be my sister, her tongue already out, mouth already laughing. Ji niu chimed my name in a mocking voice. She stepped once with a bare foot upon my stomach, and that was enough. Then she was off and gone, her footsteps heavy to my ear against the wet earth. In my dream I prayed to sink into the earth, to penetrate it and sleep forever with Lim Mao su and with my long-dead sister.

***

And so I slept. I awoke eventually, alone in Lim Mao su's glade. I rose and stumbled through the tallow wood, my head fine and numb. I was home for who knows how long. Then came the conscription, but still I slept.

I looked at Lu.

"Awake again?" he asked.

"How long was I?"

"A few minutes only. Something's happening. The smoke is thinning." It was true—the sheets had become white mists, the northern sky showing. *Throom-chee*, one, two, three. *Throom-chee*, one, two. *Throom-chee*, one, two, three. Now they will come at last. *Throom-chee*, one, two. Ji niu, Ji niu, Ji niu. *Throom-chee*, Ji niu, Ji niu. *Throom*, Ji niu, Ji niu, Ji niu… silence. Nothing!

"Nothing!" I cried, but I was not the only one. Shouts went up along the line.

"The drums have stopped," said Lu. "What does it mean?"

***

Lu woke me the morning of conscription, his hand on my knee. He had news the Yee Bei were coming to collect their tribute or avenge the sanctuary of refugees or some other slight. The Dangxiang councilors had reached our village, one of the last of their route north.

"Dress," Lu said. "They will take you as you are."

We were gathered, herded into the village stables where some would be sent to Ningxia, others to the River to secure water, the supplies, guard the oxen, the waterfront yurts. Sheep bleated in their pens, their teeth like fingers through their lips. The stables were warm in the midmorn. We shuffled in our line, were handed a pike or a spade. A councilor took our names. The strong would fight. The weak or old would work supply. Some were naked, ripped from their beds in the morning hours. A boy in front of me stripped, giving his rough smock to the old grandfather in front of him, the man's wrinkled pride restored. Others, looking back, nodded approvingly.

There, six men ahead of me, was Ji niu's father, naked, his buttocks pale, flat. His spine threatened to burst out of his back, his skin gaunt. I had seen him often at market or working his crop. I called to him, meant to give him my clothes, to duplicate the young man's gesture.

"What are you doing?" Lu whispered, his red tongue purple in the dim stables, sunlight thin through the open doors beyond the oxen, the sheep.

Ji niu's father turned, scanned our line. I began to explain but my tongue was still asleep. A few of the men pointed me out as the one who had called his name, but still there was no recognition in his eyes.

"Who are you?" he spat.

Lu clutched at my elbow. "He doesn't know you. Keep quiet or you'll offend him more."

My tongue lurched to life. "Lim Mao su and I love your daughter." Why had I said *his* name, the name of her lover, instead of my own?

"You're mad," Lu whispered.

The man stared at me dully. "You are a lunatic. The boy is dead."

"And so am I. I love your daughter all the same. Take my clothes."

"Do not mention my daughter again." He turned his back to me then, stiffening.

Whispers rose and fell along the line. *He says he is a dead boy.* Which? *One of the refugees from the north.* He says he loves the daughter. *He is mad, his friend says.* We fight with mad men.

The murmurs were hummings, cooings. Slowly, my tongue curled, my ears sealed, my nose pinched, my eyes filmed. I was asleep again, doing battle with Lim Mao su, clinging to my new pike. Lu tongued his betel at my side. When our turn came with the councilor, Lu spoke for us both.

***

The courier began as a sliding dot in the distance, a hovering spider that dipped and rose with the hills. Soon he was discernable, his stripe-legged horse's hooves moving faster than seemed possible, faster than they should for how slowly he progressed, how ponderous his approach. At long last we heard his voice on the wind, saw his square face.

"Khan goes west. Temujin goes west!"

Once more the cry went up along the row. The courier told us the Uygurs and Black Qidan to the west had made some gross offense, had angered Khan. With luck, Temujin would overreach and the Yee Bei would be destroyed. The men shouted, cheered, clutched each other's shoulders, clapped each other's backs. Soon they broke to make fires, burn all the kindling meant for tomorrow's night watch. That is when I spied Ji niu's father twenty men down the line. He was the only other who frowned. I moved to get his attention, but then he was crying, eyes in his palms, given over to some private grief. He was no longer naked, finding cloth somewhere on the march. I studied him, his fists clasped at his cheeks. The family resemblance to Ji niu was slight.

The ash pits still embered from the night watch, and soon the fires were built again. Everywhere the sparks of peace and life floated, smoldered on the warming air, a black and red snow. The men were singing, chanting:

"Women, women, our fight is done,

Temujin goes WEST and home we come."

Still, Ji niu's father leaned against the battlement, blinking into the north. He had stopped grieving, and so I approached him. Seeing me, he turned, brandished his pike, jabbed the air. No one took notice.

Sheep were paraded, led by noose, one to each victory pyre. Knives flashed and necks opened, blood spraying, sending up choking black smoke. One by one the frightened sheep were silenced, their eyes rolling red, tongues flopping over finger-teeth, black gums. The sheep heads were split for bread or skewered through the eye and nose, tossed into the fires. The men were jubilant, dancing, churning the loess. The cooks among us began to hack, chop at the limbs and guts.

"Back, devil!" Ji niu's father spat. His teeth were narrow at their roots. "Back! Back!" He seemed to look beyond me, through me. Who was he seeing in my stead? The man's chin fell open, his eyes wide, his voice a weak cough over the hiss of the fires. "Give her back to me." Then I knew it. We were both beaten. I turned away, half hoping for a pike through my back, but none came.

Lu's gory mouth was open, his teeth betel red. He held a pouch of arkhi, the alcohol milk, in one hand, prancing around the nearest pyre, the head of a sheep on his pike, its tongue loose in the air. For a moment, cloud slipped over the morning sun, blanketing the sky as it went.

"Farewell friend," I said, but he did not hear me. He swung the sheep's head about, shoving it into the faces of those who laughed and sang, those who found themselves only now, given a reprieve from Temujin, to be awake. With the sound of festival behind me, I crept over the pike row, lowered myself off the battlement, and

began my long march over the Gobi hills, to find the steppe, to chase Lim Mao su into the west.

The West

It is the end of history and Petr stabs his hand through The Wall, shouting, *Glory be to God!* Huddled at his hips are his daughters, whose miniature fingers worm into the soft concrete, picking quick concentrics. Their faces are fell, eyes brassy in the floodlights, concealed in the darkness. Petr grins to see them dig but fears they will be separated in the bedlam. The entire barrier crumbles in places, splatters apart as the men and boys with hammers and picks attack the wall around him. Petr squeezes his girls closer. There are great shouts all about, voices thick and urgent. The sun has long since set and the young November sky is cloudless and calm so far away. Cheap cameras are everywhere, quick sparks in the night.

Somewhere, Petr imagines, typewriters and keyboards *click, click, click*. Music stumbles from a stereo: *Alle Menschen werden Brüder*. The Wall is brown and green and graffitied, bubble-lettered, exclamation-pointed: *Blood is thicker than concrete!*

A small hole has opened before him. Petr sees red clothing, a shoulder, an eye, a German face and teeth—it is a small, bear-like man, bearded, his cheeks reserved. There are many men singing and clapping. This one's coat is German, and they are brothers still! *Alle Menschen werden Brüder*.

"Hand your daughters through to freedom! Hand them through!"

The hole is almost big enough. They could have gone around. The checkpoint is unmanned. But this, this is better. His daughters will remember always. Petr cries to lift his youngest. His mouth agape, she is through, and then it is his little Sofie

next. She is across, scraping her knee, and the little man hauling her sets her gently down. Sofie shouts, arms out for her Papa. The free man extends a shoulder. “Come through, Brother! Come through to the West!” The squeeze is still tight, and Petr rips his shirt—a cut to his stomach—but it is nothing. He, too, sheds tears to be across. His cheeks and temples throb from the excitement. He leaps to embrace the man he does not know, who smells of bread and cheese. Perhaps he is a baker, his hair trimmed in the recent fashion. Petr’s daughters hug his legs, screaming. Around him is dancing, a whirl of bodies and sounds and music. A new wind whisks the hair from his sticky forehead. It is the end of history. Alle Menschen werden Brüder.

Glory be to God! he shouts, separating from the man. His voice is weak and thin in his own head.

“Do you have somewhere to go?” the man says, his fur-face squinched, tears ebbing, eyes blinking. “Of course you do not. You will stay with me. You will be boarders in my home. All the state is free to you here—zoo, concert, museum! There is tomato soup and cheese, my little ones.” His lips trembling from beneath his beard, the man bends to the girls. “There is warm bread and American chocolate from my American friends.” The man spreads his hands to show the size. His sleeves bundle about his elbows. “This is life in the West!”

Petr grabs the man’s hand. *Yes, yes I will stay in your home. You are too kind!* There is a difference in their dialects, or perhaps it is something else.

“It is nothing. You will pay with American dollars. Uncle—” He leans once more his bear-face to the girls, “You may call me Uncle Lukas—” and, eying Petr,

“Uncle Lukas will charge little, twenty dollars a day. You will pay me with American dollars. You must understand. American dollars and you may stay in my home as long as you like. Welcome to the West, Brother!”

The Abandoned Child

There were eight lanes, including two self-serve, a sign lighted above only this one—six with the curly-Q font, a smiling face with apostrophe eyes in the number's loop. Each of the remaining seven signs sported their own dim number-faces, a one-cheeked three, a big-chinned two, a paramour four. Eight was doubly friendly, mirrored at the waist. Sam's father never would have put up with the grotesqueness of modern shopping, though he wouldn't have used that word. Twice a month he kidnapped Sam to the SafeWay to teach him about money, spent his own mother's Social Security check on bacon, eggs, flour—no snacks, no treats. Sam would sneak a grape off a stem, a cookie from a plastic bin, and he had to be careful, careful, lest his father notice. In the forty years since, things had changed, and it was the stores who stole from you.

The bagel-eared, green-aproned cashier swiped the items faster than Sam could retrieve them from his cart, punching item codes and discount mathematics with spidery fingers. Sam sweated, heaving back and forth, prickles along his sweatered shoulders. He couldn't arrange the items on the belt as he'd planned, by size and type. Instead he found himself tossing cream cheese with Kleenex, bread with kitty litter, mayo with bananas—hurrying to appease the Bagel's grasping fingers, to keep rhythm with the barcode beep. Only fear of cracking the eggs slowed Sam and showed him the sack boy, a stooped, ogreish villain who was crushing Sam's fajitas in with the ketchup, cramming onions and delicate avocados into a bag with the detergent, the Drain-O.

"Plastic okay?" the creature mumbled.

Sam nodded, grinning stupidly, for weren't they the same, those two, divided by generation and income level and SAT score? Weren't we all a little ogreish—the poor man. Sam's father could not have lived in a world like this, or perhaps it would have been the world that would be reshaped, bent by his presence into order and logic.

Sam's jalapeños mashed against the sprouts piling at the end of the conveyor line, the belt humming along. Bagel and the ogre were out of sync. A stained patch of belt swept up and under Sam's potatoes, sliming them. Sam teetered, steadied himself, yanking out his wallet. Behind him in line, a gum-smacking mother hipped her binkie-sucking toddler whose octopus fingers clutched at the rear end of Sam's cart. Sam steered the cart away from the child, down the aisle, but over his shoulder the child eyed him, as if it just couldn't wait to grow up and charge him 900 dollars to adjust his shocks or drill his teeth or neuter his pet or proposition him in the hallway after a three-hour lecture on cooperative learning styles and deconstructing power relationships, and it would take Sam a beat too long at the then-age of sixty-five to decide whether to refuse, laughing, or to haggle for a more reasonable price.

"Run it again," Bagel said, his hand tapping the belt.

"What's that?"

"Again. Do it again. It didn't read." Bagel chopped the air, an invisible credit card between his thumb and forefinger.

Sam pulled his wallet back out of his pocket, and the hip-hugger reached its little suckers in the direction of his Visa. Sam re-swiped, and at last, after a moment of horrid insecurity where Bagel and Ogre and Binkie stood in judgment of him, the system approved, and Sam mimed g'day, escaping down the aisle, the row of number faces, nodding at gray-haired, sad-eyed security guard Joe.

Outside, in the car, groceries stashed, Sam idled, listening to his music—old men rasping out their old hits. He cradled a frappuccino on his belly, one of four he'd bought just now on a whim. Across the way and a few cars up, a girl bopped in a passenger seat, waiting for mommy. Sam sipped his frappuccino and averted his eyes when the girl noticed him. She had brown hair and amorphous features through the windshield, but she had noticed Sam. Now she was still, her hands up about her face, messing with hair or eye makeup. The girl must be thirteen, fourteen, like his own daughter, only this one was pretty. She primped now, tipping her head from side to side, yawning, stretching her arms out over her head, pushing her back up and shoulders out. Sam's frappuccino tasted wonderful, beautiful even, like something from California or imported from the clean part of Italy. The bottle was cold and solid in Sam's palm and soon empty, bubbling at the bottom and on his upper lip.

Sam turned up the volume. The girl had the overhead light on now, revealing her as thin, wispy haired, big-eared, lipsticked—did she just put it on?—weak chinned, a current and future violinist by its tilt, hated by her friends for her perfect nose. She rooted around in the dash, a new CD? a piece of gum? a handgun to murder

her old man? Her shirt was a boy's polo with white collar, a hint of thin bone out of thin neck. Sam's insides bubbled away.

Suddenly forgetting him, the girl picked her nose.

Sam plopped the empty bottle into the cup holder, raked the engine all the way over, and puttered home.

All the neighborhood association's trees were stunted with bailing wire, less than twelve feet high, meticulously pared, and the neighborhood association's squirrels were small and rat-like, zigzagging stupidly in front of Sam's Toyota. Three almost suicided themselves as he careened around curbs, mini-roundabouts. Sam drove safely everywhere but here, the association's delinquent trashbins so many go-cart obstacles. Sam laughed imagining the association representative, a blue-hair with a clipboard and rule book, pounding on the door of his boyhood home with its wild yard, fading paint, mosquito pond.

Sam's throaty music had ended or paused, looping itself, and the car filled with the deep staccato of his own breathing. Through the tint at the top of his windshield the moon was full in the daylight, a four-p.m. early riser. All around it was blue sky, so it seemed an incandescent disk, featureless, an albino sun. *A little boy would have been nice*, Sam thought. *What a son he might have made!* Sam looked at the trees, looked at a mad squirrel, the dash, his rearview mirror, the bubbled frappuccino bottle, the son-moon again. He thought, *Wish I had a camera*, but then he was home, ramping up the drive, and moon or not he had to go in.

The daughter was home—a flat-faced, flabby child with stupid eyes, stupid hands fumbling with the remote, picking at her shirt, her hair, her eyebrows. The living room was immaculate—clean surfaces, wood floors—except for the child's school books strewn across the rug like so much kindling. The television, a rectangular indoor sun, chanted a gentle-sex chorus out of white-dressed men's mouths. Music television. The child shifted itself, splaying its legs.

"Off," Sam said.

The television clicked to black and the child moaned.

"Not before dinner, you know," Sam said. "How was school?"

"We learned log-rhythms, expo-nents, frac-tally nothing."

"Clever." Sam heaped the first wave of sacks onto the counter. "Wait till you get to cow-culus where you'll learn moo-tiples."

The child groaned again. "That's way worse."

"Well, you put me on the spot. Say, clever child, how's your grade in algebra?" Sam stopped moving, his back to the living room, eggs in his right hand.

"The sum of the squares of the sides of a right triangle."

"I see." Sam sat the eggs away from the counter's edge, half turning to see his daughter. "And last Friday's test?"

"Ent got it back yet." The child picked at her shirt, plucking lint balls off the slope of a breast.

"Don't be stupid. Of course you did. Mr. Thimbull told your mother you'd get it today."

"Mr. Sympull the liar," she said, picking at the other breast. It was indecent. Sam glanced away.

"Don't be mean. I'd hate to hear what you say about me to your friends. Shall I search your things?"

The child shrugged, darting eyes at the kitchen trashcan. Sam followed.

"You didn't throw it away?"

"So what? It's mine, isn't it?" The child's face flushed, looking fatter, wetter as she finally left the lint alone, jutting her jaw at him.

Sam tipped back the lid, rescued the folded test from a yogurt top and a Kleenex.

"And you've been eating before dinner?"

"Oh my god, leave me alone!" the child screeched, standing, flinging down her lap-pillow, smashing her way through her books and on upstairs to her room. The house tensed and eased as her door rattled.

Sam peeled open the exam, found the grade, said *fuck* twice without heat and found himself unable to breathe, if only for a second. Yogurt had spread itself along the black-granite counter, hitchhiking along the back of the papers. The strawberry smear looked exactly, exactly like amniotic fluid, pink for a girl.

Sam slid a paper towel over the mess, tried to clean the exam, sighed, and trudged back outside for the rest of the groceries and one last glance at the pale ball resting above the neighborhood association's neighborhood.

The house was quiet with his child upstairs. There was no sign of her sobbing, or maybe by now she was sneaking a cigarette or candy bar out from a stash beneath her bed, maybe a voodoo doll with his name pinned. Sam's near-bald head rested against the leather back of the couch. In another room a grandfather clock plinked away. The central air stretched "Ahh" into a background hum. Somewhere off behind his head, a fast car distanced itself, sans muffler. The digital display below the television glowed out at Sam, filling the twilit room with a peat-green, ecliptic creep, inching forward as the light through the kitchen dimmed.

Once, when Sam was a boy, he discovered a stack of *Playboys* in the ditch behind his house. It was a wondrous find, something man-made and forbidden just stacked among the rocks, the sewage trickle ruining one but leaving six or seven untouched. Sam wanted desperately to keep one, to stash it in the house, but he did not, out of fear of his father. After one hard rain the pages were useless, the women all bleeding into each other. After another they were washed away entirely. Real women, Sam had found, were pale shadows of the imagined ones he gave up for his father.

A crack and bang as the front door opened and hit its backstop. The peat glow flushed away with the new door illumination. Crinkled bags shielded his wife's legs.

She bustled into the kitchen, plopped her things onto the counter, gasped at their daughter's wet exam, and stomped her heels twice before noticing Sam on the couch in the adjacent room.

"A C-minus?" his wife said, pinching the papers between sharp nails.

"She tried to throw it away. Didn't even have the sense to bury it deep or, I don't know, toss it away at school."

"I don't believe it. I spent hours helping her study."

"I know. She didn't even change the three to an eight, the minus to a plus."

"Think this Thimbull doesn't like her?" The woman was almost strange in that mauve blouse bunching at her hips, the mid-calf skirt. Had she been out with a high-school friend, someone to impress?

"Unlikely."

Sam's wife stabbed the countertop with her nails as she glanced again at the paper, trapping a corner of her lower lip between incisors. Wetness welled along her eyelashes, and Sam thought her beautiful, still tremendously sharp and beautiful.

"You'll go see him tomorrow."

"I will?"

"There must be something. A C-minus?" Her tucked blouse had rolled up over her hip, hiding her waistline.

"It's a test, not an essay. I'm sure she earned it." Sam sank into the couch, his face past the ears a sandstone relief.

Sam's wife turned, half-threw the paper at him, it flapping to the hardwood between them. "You're sure? What do you know about it? You didn't help her study all night." Strands of her hair had wriggled free and fell across her forehead. Her cheeks flushed, eyes flashing. Hundreds and hundreds of times he'd seen them like this.

"No, I didn't. You're right. I'll go see him in the morning." Sam's hands were open, up, palms to her.

"You will?" His wife turned away, fixing her hair. "Just like that?"

"Well, maybe." Sam shifted on the couch. "Think we could send the girl to a friend's tonight, maybe get take-out and—"

The wife looked at Sam, her eyes widening and shrinking. "Not a chance in hell. A reward, after this?" Her finger aimed at the floor between them.

"I need one. It's been a strange day."

"You?" she said. "You?"

***

The room was tiny, easily half the size it should have been, Sam a giant among the desks and small Thimbull, a whistle-breather with black rabbit eyes and even less hair. Sam had never been inside the school before, but all schools looked the same, like red-bricked, low-grade prisons or huge World War II submarines with their green-flaking pipes, lockers, and low ceilings. With a grand sweep Thimbull pointed to one of the desks. Sam thought briefly about sitting on or in it. He chose, and the arm rest stabbed his belly. The little man was already talking.

"The problem, Mr. —," Thimbull coughed, "is one of attitude, I believe."

"Attitude? Call me Sam."

"Yes. As I see it, the Miss appears simply uninterested in algebra, as she spends most of the period, how do you say," Thimbull danced his hands about, a conductor behind his green-plastic desk, "goofing with her little pallies."

"Goofing?"

"You know, nattering about tra-la-la and who-did-what and Johnny-dream-boat two rows up." Thimbull smiled, his lower lip completely hidden behind his teeth, his hands still making turns in the air.

"I see." Sam did not see.

Thimbull's chair, green and leathered like spoiled salmon, squeaked as he leaned forward, lowered his leporine eyes to Sam's belly.

"What's to be done about it, hmm?"

Sam had been about to ask something similar. "You saying there's something I should do?"

"Who else? Miss tells me her mother has been helping her, a boon to be sure, but if Ma-ma isn't sufficient there's Pa-pa as well."

Along Sam's neck a line of itching erupted. This room was insufferably small, and these desks! This man, too. Sam could crush his little oblong head, stomp out his raisin eyes. He knew how his father would have dealt with this man, having seen him strike a stray dog, and once was enough. All about the classroom walls hung posters

with math puns—*Algebra + Geometry = Fun! The Square Root of Joy Is Hard Work. Success Is Not an Imaginary Number.*

"I see," Sam said.

"If I may suggest—" Thimbull twiddled his thumbs in the air before his face, staring still at Sam's stomach. "An hour's study with Dad the Professor, who—no doubt—is very busy—"

"Not really," Sam said, readjusting his child's chair.

"All the better!" Thimbull grimaced. "Dad the Professor—if I risk playing the analyst—whose standards are a bit high, no? For whom C is not average but unacceptable, unless it is in his own classes, no? Dad who is surely intellectually intimidating, no?" Thimbull was all grace and tact, his fingertips meeting.

"No," Sam said, frowning.

Thimbull's palms were out. "I don't criticize, Mr. Sam. I only theorize. She speaks of you sometimes. I know a bit about the situation. We have had conversations, your daughter and I." A tongue crept out and along irregular teeth.

"Would you like to know what she calls you, Thimbull, in private?" Sweat nibbled Sam's neck.

"Please, I didn't mean—" The man pushed back in his chair, glanced once at the door.

"Thimbull the Simple. Perhaps you do not like my daughter." Sam could break this desk in two, drive Thimbull through the chalkboard, empty his clever brains into the kelp-colored wastebasket.

Thimbull's face fell, his lips pursing as if he were suddenly and horribly bored. "I have a fondness for all my children, Dad. How about you? I am good at my job, which is to teach young misters and mistresses algebra. It is not glamorous or challenging like your subjects, but I see most everyone's parents, and they all convince themselves I dislike their Jane or John, even the ones who have smart children," Thimbull grunted, "like you." Thimbull bounced his head at Sam. "Even the ones with the perfect children, and I must tell you, Dad, since you are a scholar and can appreciate my position, that yours is a most conventional charge, more emblematic of a parent's own insecurities, own feelings. At this age, Pa-pa, we all hate our children. So I suggest you get over it and help the child study."

***

Sam clutched another glass frappuccino, already empty with milky bubbles. His music was up louder than usual, but there was still the sound of his breathing. He had soaked his undershirt, and a pale blue line had crept through to his collar. A new wetness sparked along his suddenly thin, suddenly stretched neck. Sam snapped down the rearview mirror, it now reflecting his bouncing leg, faded slacks. From the driveway the house seemed huge, the carport a gaping jaw set to hinge upon him. The Toyota wrestled itself still beneath him, idling. How long had he been here? Slowly, Sam unbuttoned his shirt, hauled it up out of his slacks and adjusted himself. More comfortable at last and with his breath calming, his mind left Thimbull and the stabbing chair.

For a decade, Sam's father had driven an ugly brown Ford pickup that got browner when he pushed through flooded, muddied creeks along the back roads to campgrounds, its wheels scraping terribly over slippery rocks. One of the first years the water seemed too high, Sam silent and big-eyed as his father took them into the torrent, the water splashing up against Sam's window. His father laughed deeply when they reached the other side, looking at him, and Sam thinking about crying, it was so scary. That was an old, old memory, right at the edge, the limit.

Out Sam's window and three houses down was a parallel neighbor in his car, a Nissan. The pudgy man scowled, looking down, at what—a checkbook, a receipt, a day planner? The man sat up and eyed his own front door, windows, and then briefly parallel-Sam, who pretended to fix the downturned mirror. When Sam stole another look the man was pinching a cigarette, inhaling it in huffs before stubbing the butt on the dash, spraying something on himself and in the car, at last leaping out and into the house.

Sam was alone again. He turned the key halfway, calming the car, listened to the men's old swelling throats, and shut his eyes.

A terrible and sudden clop jolted Sam, his hands flying to his face. A palm and face pressed against his window. Sam peered out from behind defensive fingers.

"Are you sleeping?" his wife barked, her voice fat and low across the seal and over the music.

Sam wriggled out the key and popped open his door.

"You're wet, aren't you?"

"Exploding water fountain," Sam lied, ambling out of the car. His wife had on her big hoop earrings, mascara.

"Did you see Thimbull? Small little man, isn't he?"

"Small? No, he was alright." They were in the carport and the door began to shut off the afternoon. Sam's car was outside, but what did it matter. His wife keyed open the pantry and they were in, his wife flitting to the kitchen to deposit her pockets. The pantry smelled of bread, kitty litter. Sam wandered into the livingroom, kicked his child's school books out of the way and collapsed into the couch.

"What did he say?" His wife had her back to him, unhooking her earrings. She shaded in a third of the doorway, her backside a uniform black, out of the kitchen window's light. Her shadow cast across the hardwood, its tip landing in Sam's lap.

"Nothing, really."

"Nothing?" His wife turned, struggling with the right hoop, her earlobe stretching and bobbing. She wore a white blouse and brown skirt, stockings, heels again. Her eyes were dark pits of mascara. Sam thought briefly about a very long time ago, a shadow of a memory out of his childhood.

"Teacher stuff." Sam yanked at his collar, leaned to rest elbows on knees.

"Do you think he likes her?" His wife blinked at Sam from the kitchen, raked her earlobe.

"I'm sure. I think that's a normal fear that some parents have. I think that just reflects your own insecurities."

Sam's wife stared at him. "What insecurities?"

"Oh, I don't know. I shouldn't say."

"Say." The woman stopped moving.

Sam looked off into the ceiling, the walls, spoke slowly, with deliberation. "That some parents don't like their children at this age so they worry about it in other people, teachers. It's all natural, predictable—"

"To hate your child? You think I hate our child?" His wife's face was pinched, twisted, the mascara pits turned deeper, darker, the whites of her eyes grey by proximity. Her hands left her ears, hovered in front of her.

"I didn't say 'hate.'"

Sam's wife was at him, closing the distance, her heels clopping across the wood then carpet. Her balled fists flew at his head, his eye-sockets. She rasped, coughed, choked, heaved, making animal cries, small, plaintive, violent. Sam reached for her, missing, pawing the air to stop her. One of her nails dragged beneath his left eye, curling skin. His lips were wet as he struggled to stand, but she was over him, her chest flopping, her teeth barred and popping together madly, and she was fantastic and wild, all hair and fingernails and tension. Sam had been yelling inarticulates for moments already when his daughter showed upon the stairs, frozen. Somehow his hand was stuck in his wife's blouse, bouncing around in parody of the first time, eighteen years before, and it was the same lack of control, the same terrible elation. She still wailed at his head, hitting with wrists and forearms, and in a moment of madness he yanked his arm free—because this was improper, impolite—ripping her,

leaving her exposed, one side of the blouse still loose over her hip, red, her skin puffy, unbruised, still beautiful in front of their fat-faced daughter, the inevitable product of that first time, the logical conclusion of fumbling hands and wrists and fingers in the first five years of their marriage—the same daughter-product who was cursing him roughly but without heat, with energetic eyes and curling tongue.

His wife was off him and gone, loping past their daughter up the stairs, not even crying, not in the least damaged.

Eyes fuzzed, wetness all along cheeks and lips, Sam stumbled into the bready pantry, out the carport door, waiting for the garage to spit him out, so he might climb into his Toyota. All the while his daughter's ejaculations typewritered at him from the open door. Safe at last with the carport closing, swallowing his wife and child, Sam scanned for the parallel neighbor, but he was not in his car sneaking a smoke, and Sam was utterly alone. Cranking the key, he careened out of the driveway in search of a new frappuccino and the preening, red-mouthed violinist from the parking lot.

In line beneath the emasculated eight, Sam dropped the sixteen-pack of frappuccino onto the conveyor. Bagel had been replaced by a triple-chinned hag, at least fifteen years Sam's senior. Ogre was at the ready.

"Plastic okay?"

Sam slammed his Visa through the card reader, punched the touch-screen choices. "What are my options?" he asked.

"'Scuse me?" Ogre had the frappuccinos halfway into the plastic already.

"Do I have a choice?" Sam said, snatching his receipt from startled old Jane.

"Why, sure, there's plastic or paper." Ogre began to raise the frappuccinos from the sack.

"Neither. Can I just carry it out?"

"Sure, but—"

"Thank you both very much for your assistance," Sam said, reaching and yanking the frappuccinos from the man's grasp. Craddling them, Sam dashed down the exit corridor, past sneering seven, winking six, leering four, past suddenly attentive Joe, through the sliding doors, nearly suiciding in front of a pregnant woman pushing a full load, into the parking lot and the safety of his Toyota where the music was good and the drink fresh and everything tasted like the clean part of Italy.

***

The son-moon was not out despite the hour, hidden by opaque, viscous clouds in the new night sky. Floodlights from neighbors' overhangs cast shadows along the grass. A lonely bug-zapper hung from an awning, crackling softly. Sam's backyard was small, an unfenced patch of grass bordering five others. There was no drainage ditch to explore. Two of the association's squirrels, without trees to flee to, eyed Sam from perches on a neighbor's half-porch.

Sam sat in a cream plastic lawnchair, his bare feet thrust into the shadowed grass. He was planted there, his sixteen-pack torn open and three less at his side. In the house his wife rumbled about, no doubt opening drawers and closets and airing everything in some maniacal cleaning—or packing—ritual. Whatever it was, Sam

wasn't budging. Had you replaced coffee with beer, Sam might have passed for his father, who sat nights to watch the lightning bugs and stare at the moon with his binoculars.

Somewhere behind and above his head there was a scraping sound. A window opened. Sam tilted his head back. It was his daughter's arm, a cigarette between stubby fingers. A tap of ash burned up in the air, disappearing into the moonless backdrop, the cloudy sea above and below his daughter's arm, now arms, now face peering out the window then down at him, grimacing and inhaling as it looked at Sam, then the cigarette in its hand and back again. Sam said nothing, cracked the cap of another frappuccino drink, and smiled up at his daughter. The child frowned at him, mouthed something to itself, hesitated, cursed him mildly, flicked the cigarette out into the night, and pulled closed its bedroom window.

As a boy Sam tried to run away several times, cranking his window, removing the mesh bug-screen, getting as far as a mile down the slippery creek before the tears stopped and he turned, hurrying to scramble back up the rotting siding before his father noticed.

The window opened again, the child this time lighting a new cigarette, brazenly sucking it, and staring down at Sam.

"Why are you and mother fighting?" the child exhaled, its black hair hanging out in front of its moon face.

"It's your fault, really," Sam said, tipping his head and the cold bottle back.

"Me? What did I do?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Was it the stupid test? Why do you even care? And you tore her shirt. That was pretty mean. She's been crying. I mean, we already talked about it. Are you going to apologize?"

"To who? To you?"

"Well, yeah. And her." His child blew smoke out into the night.

Sam said nothing, sipping the drink, feeling the cool glass on his hot tongue. No way in hell his father would apologize. "Haven't decided yet," he said. "Should I?"

"Umm, yeah. You better."

"Or what?" There was a sharpness in Sam's throat, an edge. The association's squirrels heard it, popped their heads up. The lonely zapper hiccupped in its electric hum.

"Or we'll hate you," his daughter said, scratching the corner of a lip with a free nail, the glowing tip of the cigarette a caustic firefly above Sam's head.

***

A telephone rang inside the house, but Sam was comfortable out here. Through the sliding glass door, Sam's wife, wearing pajamas, no makeup, her hair in a towel, pulled the phone from the wall, spoke into it, but Sam couldn't hear her hello.

What did he remember of algebra anyway? Exponents, variables, slope-point calculations, radial geometry, Pythagoras, Euler, Euclid—amazingly, he remembered it all.

His wife had a hand up to the nape of her neck, rubbing it. She turned, glanced through the door, but it was too fast for Sam to tell anything. He had always hated the telephone, the expectation to answer, how to be polite when dealing with salesmen, strangers. As a boy, he'd pull the phone off the hook, run it to his big father, who'd say, *Answer it, damnit*, but Sam would only hold it out, the man on the line saying *hello? hello?* until Sam's father grasped the receiver, pointing Sam off to his room as punishment.

Sam's wife, a strange look upon her face, her mouth pursed, the phone clasped to her chest, slid the door open, leaned out into the night and said it.

"Sam, they're telling me your father is dead."

"Nonsense," he said immediately. A silly idea. He was just thinking about his father.

Sam's daughter moved in the house somewhere behind his wife. "Has dad apologized yet?" she sang, his wife turning to hiss her away. "Wait, what's the matter? Don't shoo me. You always do that." His wife's hand was free from her chest, the nursing home people overhearing. "I'm old enough. Tell me!" His wife pointed a crooked finger at their daughter, mouthed *Shh*.

"Apparently your grandfather is dead," said Sam. He sipped slowly from the glass.

"What? Paw-paw?" The daughter pushed past her mother to look at Sam, her face frantic.

"No, the other one. My father."

"Oh," she said, "sorry." The child averted her eyes, wouldn't look at him, her hands working against her pant legs.

"It's alright. You can go," Sam said, and his daughter fled, pushed back through his wife and up the stairs.

"Sam, do you want to talk to these people?"

"No," he said, then, "Yes, okay, yes," before she could turn.

***

Sam's wife was almost asleep when he started. He said that as a boy he hated his father, that his father was tyrannical, but that really he was just big, made big by the absence of Sam's mother, turned self-reliant, oppressive, terrible. Over the years he had thought about his father so much, making him at times a god of strength, masculinity, silence—a devil at others. Sam said that he was glad the man was dead, that it was a cliché and ghastly to admit true, not because he hated him now or held a grudge, but because the man took up so much space in Sam's head. His father was squeezing out things important to Sam, Sam himself. Sam said that his own identity was weaker than his father's in his mind.

"That's all fine and good," his wife added after Sam lost energy. "You can think about it if you like for a while, but it isn't about you anymore. It's about our little girl. Everything, everything, even you and your father, is less important."

Sam scoffed but had the presence of mind to shut up. What an unreasonable notion. His wife didn't understand fathers and sons at all. Didn't understand him at all. His father was a great man, a giant man, big big big, bigger than him in every way. There he was in the metal chair, peering up at the moon, the only other thing half as big, lightning bugs giving him a wide berth. His father wasn't beaten by anything. Then, certain it was true, Sam fell asleep, dreaming of his father's heavy hand upon his shoulder.

Grinder Monkey

Dancing on the macabre stool, my grinder monkey slipped. It was more like a tumble, a violent spill unexpected, for the monkey was an old pro, had danced his frump a thousand times. A million times perhaps his prehensile toes threw themselves into the air, sailed a while in somersault before landing charmingly, his eyes as black as the patron's coin palmed, a gift to the monkey pocketed by me. He didn't always land kindly, of course; sometimes it rained and he flopped about. It rained nearly all the time in the city, if you could call such a place a city—Mudville perhaps, a nasty place full of rats. You can't call anything in life when monkeys that are supposed to glide safely to their coins spill their brains on macabre stools, though I suppose the stool macabre only in hindsight—it seemed yellow for years.

Perhaps it was more of a blue when it was cloudy, which was always, and the monkey did not go easily. Monkey, being closer to you than to me, did not ease into anything, let alone a thing like a thing's spill—since to give it a gender is silly, isn't it? A name is quite pathetic. That is why I call it Monkey now. "Hubert," I called to him, and his mouth opened and jerked and opened some more, and his eyes became civilized, became settled in his singular focus to… live, I guess. And I reached for him, my little Hubert, and I needed him to land right, since we had begged together. And I reached him and he was like I described, and his fingers were grasping, my they were beautiful fingers! And I gave him my own fat finger to hold, and in his madness he bit me. He had never, but I was not shocked. I had seen dying things before.

I gave him that finger. Like a pacifier he bit it and scratched at me, but I had resolved to give it to him. And I was about to renounce my gift because the pain was too much when he began to slow, the blood running too fast. And the woman who had shrieked when he fell was telling me to kill him, kill it, before it bit her. She was mad and I had already decided to give Hubert my finger. And he was slowing now, and I didn't want him to slow, so I poked his belly. He looked at me then with such hatred that I withdrew my finger, mangled as it was, as if I had torn a page from the Bible. I had betrayed Hubert in the end. I turned on the woman, crunched finger pointing and bellowed, "Et le galopin, mon ami?!"

Remember, Please

Old Sam cannot remember what to do with this piece of paper. He dangles a pen over it and his mind hiccups. He has plucked the paper from a shelf. The room is small—white walls, a cluttered desk, a bar they use for dining, cat toys littering the carpet. There are windows though it is nighttime and they are blinded. There is a television but it is black and off. It is quiet save the washing machine and dishwasher, which flub together in chorus, and the shufflings of Character B, who is writing imperative Post-Its and pressing them onto flat surfaces. *Empty dishwasher, please. Change laundry, please. Brush teeth, please*.

Sam squats on the couch, a pillow for a desk, squinting at the tax form. It is important Sam complete the taxes as he believes they are due already and there will be fines. Sam has been staring at the paper for three minutes. His black pen leaks onto the couch's blue pillowcase. *She will not notice*, Sam thinks. Sam's thinning thighs bounce against the couch. His heels slip in and out of his loafers. Sam blinks. There are deep shadows off the cat toys, a cardboard tubing, a styrofoam box. The room could be brighter. He cannot remember the cats' names. There are three of them, he believes.

"So I can't watch the Alan Alda show?"

"Don't bother me now," Sam mumbles, gnawing his chin. He buries the remote further into the couch. Old, tiny hairs slip under Sam's teeth like thumbing a comb.

"Because of what you're doing?" From the kitchen, Character B peers at Sam over her glasses.

"Don't pester me. You always pester."

"Well," Character B says, ripping off another Post-It. Her shoulders rise and fall. There are nippled sequins on her green holiday sweater.

Sam sees the Post-It is attached to the microwave. There will be stick figures acting things out, like Sam is an aboriginal without written language. Sam remembers pictures of aboriginals in magazines from when he was a boy. He remembers everything about that.

B is already writing another. She is hidden below the waist by the bar, but as she bends her face is clear. Wrinkles parallel the forehead. The eyes are split by bifocals. B has aged. He remembers her young, much younger. B could be her own mother. Now, B's hair reminds him of grass, her skin of newsprint. Sam looks at his own hands. They are shocking and thin. Still, Sam believes he loves Character B very much. It is the same B, after all, and he seems the same Sam. He remembers college, using the old kind of phone to call her, all his friends punching his arm and laughing when he stuttered. *Hel-lo-o*.

"Will you remember the dishes?" B holds a Post-It mid-air.

"You've written me a note, haven't you?" Sam is tired and wishes there was more light for this kind of work. *Maybe there is a Post-It that tells about the tax form*.

B stamps the Post-It onto the counter. Sam frowns, remembering something about IRA-ROTH deduction. *Taxes, there are taxes to do. It must be April*.

"And the laundry? Sam, don't forget the laundry. You can do that can't you? It would be nice if I could count on you to do some things. Small things. Not too much. We aren't allowed to run the machine after ten. If you don't change the load, that horrid little man will come again, slapping our door, *Susan! Senior Sam!* What a wretched man." Her neck shakes with each syllable.

Susan! Sam thinks.

"Susan," he whispers to himself.

"The laundry?"

"There's another note for that?" A penny or nickel dislodges in the washing machine, clanking. The dishwasher shifts over to heat.

"Don't get snippy! And won't you let me watch the Alan Alda show?"

"Go to bed! I can't think with you here. I can't remember what I'm supposed to do." Susan's head dips. She scribbles another Post-It, her lips puffing. Sam watches as she removes it, walks it toward him, her hips and legs emerging from the bar, plops it onto the form in front of him. "Don't—" Sam starts then reads the note.

Please remember you can't remember well. You are ill. You do not need to do the taxes. You only need to do what I ask of you. I love you, but you are not well. Sam's eyes squint. He examines the face of Character B, who has lost her name again.

"M.A.S.H. is on?"

"It's not M.A.S.H., honey. It's something else. That show is long gone."

One of the cats creeps into the room. It is cautious. Its paws spread with each step. It is hunting—him perhaps. *Roger. Roger is the cat's name,* Sam thinks.

FIN